



シーキューブ
Cube×Curseδ×Curious

IV

水瀬葉月
Illustration くわりがため



水瀬葉月
Illustration さそりがため

Scene01:もうひとりの同居人?

フィア

夜知家の同居生活の一員である銀髪少女。このはと同じ事情を抱えつつ、学校生活に日常生活にと奮闘中!

「は、ハレンチだつ!!

人形原黒絵

見た目はちっちゃいが、このは&フィアの「ある意味先輩」。女の子いっぱいの同居生活のハレンチイベントの記録に尽力中っ。

むらまさ
村正このは

対外的には春亮の「従姉妹」な官能ボディの眼鏡娘。色々な事情がありまつて、ただいま春亮と同居中♥

「はーるーあーきーくん…?」

「や。ただいま」

「な、なに?」

たておかあいこ
楯岡藍子

ひょんなキッカケで夜知家にやってきた、ちょっと不思議な無口さん。しかしてその正体とは……?

やちはるあき
夜知春亮

今回もこんなイベントもりだくさん!?
のじじむさ少年。

PLAY

0:01:36 / 0:02:08

PAUSE

Scene02:母と十字と家族愛

アリス・ ビブオーリオ・ バスクリッハ

ビブオーリオ家族会の要である「母君」。フィアを家族会員にするべく画策しているようだが……？

「ええ。まずは、あの少年に……あなたが導く告解を

「言うまでもないが、俺は人を救うために在るモノなのだからな」

ナロウ・ナロウ・アビス 教会区く奈落»

ビブオーリオ家族会の「父君」にして、アリスが愛する《呪いの十字》。

二階堂クルリ

禍具によって「救われ」た経験を持つ、新参の家族会員。家族会の方針に賛同し、またアビスを崇拜している。

「父君は、本物以上の神様だと思います。
救われたんです」



サヴェレンティ

理事長秘書補佐のメイドさん。今回は黒絵とおそろいのチア服で応援しますっ。

「練習の成果、
よーく見ておれ!!」

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Scene03:宴の始まり

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Designed by Toru Suzuki

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—シーキューブ—
CubexCurseδxCurious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため



Prologue

It was dusk on a certain Saturday, two days before the imminent sports festival.

On the way home from shopping, Haruaki felt an inexplicable sense of loneliness. The chilly autumn breeze was showing off excessive power while the sunset sky displayed an incredible color, causing even Haruaki, who was born in this town, to be mysteriously overcome with homesickness. This scenery was enough to give anyone an "anywhere but not here" kind of feeling.

What did the silver-haired girl, Fear, walking beside him think? He wondered to himself.

Somehow there was a sense of sorrow in her expression as she narrowed her eyes slightly. It was undoubtedly the result of the chilly wind, her freezing hands and the warmth in contact with her hands. Although Haruaki was struck by a sense of nostalgia, perhaps it was different for her. Encountering these experiences for the first time, she did not feel nostalgic.

"So hair growing from the nose is called nose hair, right?"

"What are you asking all of a sudden? I'm appalled at your ability to ruin the mood!"

"I don't care about your whatever mood. Listen to me, hair growing under the armpits is called armpit hair, hair growing on the shins are called leg hair, so in that case—"

Mmmmm—Frowning, she stared at the object she was holding and raised it in front of her face.

"Hair growing on a sweet potato is called sweet potato hair, right? Is it?"

"...Who the heck knows."

What a useless man—Fear sneered as she remarked, but her fascinated gaze remained locked on the roasted sweet potato. In a stroke of misfortune for Haruaki, a cart selling roasted sweet potato had happened to pass by. "Hey hey Haruaki, what's that? I wanna eat it, I wanna eat it, I wanna eat it!" With Fear tugging his sleeve and pleading desperately, Haruaki had no choice but to buy one for her. Feeling an inexplicable

sense of nostalgia when he was paying, Haruaki could not help but buy another sweet potato for himself.

"Then what? How do I eat this?"

"What do you mean, how do you eat this? ...Just open your mouth and take a bite directly."

"Along with the skin? And there's sweet potato hair growing on it?"

"Hmm~ This depends on personal preference. Some people like to peel the skin before they eat. I like the skin, so I eat it whole... Look, like this. Mmm... Wow, hot, this is hot."

Watching Haruaki, Fear went "Oh" and after resting her gaze on her own sweet potato for a few seconds, she finally took a large bite as though she had finally made her decision.

"Hey, don't take such a big bite all at once..."

"..."

Chew chew chew chew... Chewing the sweet potato in her mouth, Fear suddenly stopped. As she gazed at the teeth marks on the bit open sweet potato, Haruaki asked:

"H-Hey, what's the matter? Did you scald your mouth? That's why I asked you to eat slower—"

"Very..."

"Very?"

The instant he asked her in return, Fear's eyes shone as she yelled:

"Very very tasty—! This sweet potato hair is delicious—!"

"No, the main body isn't the sweet potato hair."

As failing to hear Haruaki's retort, Fear began to attack the sweet potato with the vigor of a newly liberated prisoner.

"And so sweet! It's simply roasted, but why is it so—Ahmmhrmm gobble gobble. Nuuuuu... Amazing, sweet potato hair! You are way too good, great sweet potato hair! Nose hair can't compare to you at all, you are the hair of all hair! It's decided!"

"What the heck kind of contest is that? Nose hair would be extremely troubled to find itself compared by you like that!"

This retort was ignored as well. Fear was really indulging herself in her first experience of this food. If one were to hand a rice cracker to her right now, who knew which one would she choose... But her most likely course of action would probably be to greedily eat both, one in each hand.

"Hey you, eat slower, no one is going to snatch it from you."

"Gobble gobble gobble... Ah! Oh... no... Ah~ ah~ ah~!"

The warning against her ravenous manner of eating came slightly too late. Frantically trying to switch the hot sweet potato to her other hand, Fear's hand slipped and the sweet potato instantly regained its freedom, rolling down the slope of the river embankment.

"Sigh~ I told you so."

"Ah~..."

Reaching out in vain towards the rolling sweet potato, Fear slumped her shoulders in dejection. Although it was her own fault, Haruaki could not ignore her pitiful appearance. Sighing, he shoved the remaining half of his sweet potato over to Fear.

"Here you go. I can't finish it, so help me."

"Oh... Ohhhh..."

Just as her hands were reaching out unsteadily, Fear suddenly displayed an alarmed expression as if she suddenly realized something. Narrowing her eyes halfway, she stared at Haruaki and said:

"...You're not trying to take advantage of this opportunity to curry my favor, so as to make a shameless request afterwards, are you?"

"How could that be possible!?"

"Hoo... Hmph... Got it. I guess it can't be helped, I'll help you take care of this. Food should not be wasted. This is absolutely not your charity out of pity that I am accepting. Is it really okay? I'm really gonna eat it?"

"I already said you could eat it, no problem!"

Only then did Fear recover her smile. Watching her happily taking large bites out of the sweet potato, Haruaki shrugged helplessly. At this moment—

"...Woof woof!"

A dog could be heard barking at the bottom of the embankment. Looking down, they found a dog that was being walked, using its long snout to sniff the sweet potato Fear had dropped. Its owner was a man roughly in his forties, a neighbor they knew by sight. He was Saitou-san, the university professor who lived diagonally across the street from the Yachi residence.

"Oh! It's that neighbor, what's-his-name, and that dog whose name I've forgotten! Haruaki, let's go pet him!"

"Eh? We have to hurry home to make dinner... If we go back too late, I'd feel bad for Konoha."

"Isn't it obvious that the dog is higher priority than Cow Tits no matter how you look at it!? Here I go—!"

"Oi, hey!"

With Fear charging down the embankment on her own, Haruaki had no choice but to follow. Smiling cordially, Saitou-san looked up and greeted them.

"Hi, how are you? Haruaki-kun and Fear-chan... That's your name, right?"

"Yeah! May I pet him? May I? I'm gonna? I'm petting him—!"

She took action on her own, regardless of consent. Swallowing the remainder of the sweet potato in one go to free up her hands, she then began to pet the little dog to her heart's content.

"Hey Fear, at least say hi first! Sorry, Saitou-san..."

"Haha, don't worry about it. Octavianus looks very happy too."

Haruaki remembered. Indeed, that was the dog's strange name. As much as Haruaki wanted to praise him: how befitting of a professor of European history, the sight of the corgi panting with its tongue out gave him pause, for it was way too cute to match the original name of the first Roman Emperor.

"Are you taking a stroll? Sorry for disturbing you."

"Don't worry, we happen to have some time to kill."

Saitou-san answered with a friendly smile. Haruaki inclined his head in puzzlement.

"We're going to the animal hospital for a health checkup, but there's still some time until the appointment. I was thinking of walking there leisurely, so we're just strolling around."

"Oh I see, a health checkup... It must be difficult for you."

"Yeah, troublesome as it is, a pet's owner cannot neglect it. Because I'll be busy with an upcoming academic conference, I wanted to get the checkup done first while I have time now."

What a model example of a dog lover. Haruaki really wanted to teach a certain girl a lesson—touching randomly all over is not how you show your love to an animal, okay?

"Mha~ So bouncy and soft... It reminds me of Guillotine~"

"Guillotine?"

"Uh... That's the name of the dog we were taking care of for someone a while back. Yeah, the name's weird."

"That guy was so cute too~ Wonder how he's doing now... Oh little guy, you want to eat this sweet potato? May he eat it?"

"I'm kind of scared of letting him eat stuff from the ground. Lately there has even been cases of poisoning."

"Oh, that's the one that Fear had only eaten a few bites before she dropped it."

"Really? Then it's fine."

"Very well, the owner gives permission... Mmfff, you're eating it, eating it. Does it taste good? The sweet potato hair."

"I told you already, the hair is not the main part..."

Fear then cradled Octavianus in her arms and brought the sweet potato directly near his mouth and fed him. Getting her palm licked felt rather ticklish and her laughter caused her long silver hair to sway.

(I guess I'll just let her have her fun for now... Since Saitou-san has an appointment at the hospital, they probably won't be hanging around too long.)

Hence Haruaki casually looked out towards the distant embankment to occupy himself. Only then did he notice a girl kneeling by the river, staring blankly as she soaked her hands in the water. Doesn't that feel cold? ...But she looked quite comfortable—Thinking he should mind his own business, Haruaki took a deep breath of the riverside air. He could hear the overgrown silver grass swaying lightly while a slight scent of withered grass entered his nostrils. Although the scenery lacked the vigorous vitality of spring, a quiet autumn atmosphere pervaded the surroundings. Had it been noon time when the temperature was higher, bringing a packed lunch here for a picnic might actually be quite fun.

Daydreaming like this for a while, Haruaki felt gradually sleepy despite the chilly wind. It was probably about time—Haruaki half suppressed a yawn and said:

"Huwaa... Fear, it's almost time to go home~"

"It's still early, right? Is it? Is it?"

"Hmm~ There's still some time until our appointment, so it's fine for me."

"See, the pet owner already said it's fine, so let me continue playing with this little guy!"

Fear hugged the corgi tightly, looking as though she was saying "I must have my way until I'm satisfied!"

Just as Haruaki was scratching his head in a conundrum, Fear suddenly inclined her head in puzzlement. Her gaze was directed somewhere behind Haruaki. Turning around, he saw a figure standing some distance away—The girl who had been by the river until now.

Her age was roughly around Haruaki's and she was wearing a coat with many pockets. The coat seemed slightly too large and fitted her loosely. Every one of her pockets was filled and bulging. For some reason, she was wearing long boots. Her eyes were obscured by her bangs but the lower half of her face clearly displayed feminine voluptuity.

"Au..."

Under Haruaki and Fear's gaze, she moaned like a small animal then frantically—but sluggishly—turned her head, as if trying to say "I completely wasn't looking in your direction." But because she kept turning her head to peek, the attempt was completely meaningless.

What was catching her attention? Clearly it was not Haruaki and apparently not Saitou-san. Fear—not really, it seemed. Then the only target remaining was—

"Hmm? This guy huh?"

Fear lifted up Octavianus lightly and the girl made a "...Hweh~" sound that was hard to describe. She frantically straightened her coat collar and ducked her neck down. Was she trying to hide, embarrassed, or troubled? From the way it looked, it was probably all three.

"Hmmmm... Looks like you want to hug this little guy too? I get it, I get it. Because I am a girl who can read the mood. Saitou, is it okay?"

After obtaining permission from the owner, Fear approached the girl. For some reason, she was humming and puffing her chest out proudly:

"It makes me ashamed to monopolize this wonderful creature all by myself. Since you understand this cuteness here, you are a comrade... Let's love him together! Come!"

She presented the dog right in front of the girl. Although the girl hesitated awkwardly, in the end, she still reached out with her hands slowly. Apparently, she was looking in the direction of Haruaki's group because she really wanted to pet the dog.



Handing over to the girl Octavianus whose four legs were tensed unnaturally, Fear nodded affirmatively. Despite shouting how much she wanted to play with the dog, this was quite a mature gesture—Haruaki marvelled at this pleasant surprise. As for the girl cradling the dog—

"...Pwa~"

Making this kind of strange sound, she relaxed her tense cheeks and gazed at the little dog in her arms. Her expression was obscured by her bangs but Haruaki could feel it—Her face was filled with happiness.

Her reaction naturally brought a smile to everyone's face as they watched.

To be overjoyed so simply, a momentary visit of extreme gentleness.

Then Octavianus' bladder went spectacularly incontinent.

"Uwah—!? A crisis seems to have happened!"

"H-Handkerchief, did I bring a handkerchief? W-Wait a sec!"

"Oh no! I-I'm so sorry!"

Watching the frantic reactions of Haruaki and the others, only then did the girl finally notice the unexpected ground-zero attack she had suffered. Her delayed reaction consisted of the strange sound of "...Hweh~"

"Hey, what's with you! You don't normally do this, Octavianus, do you!?"

Saitou scolded the pet that had made a blunder, but the dog did not seem like it was listening. Struggling free of the girl's arms, it simply cowered and hid behind Saitou-san's legs.

After understanding the situation, the girl bowed her head while exuding an intensely gloomy atmosphere. Of course, anyone's spirits would be dampened by something like this happening to them, but her level could be said to have veered into darkness or depression. Haruaki originally worried if her favorite clothes might be ruined, but seeing her unconcerned with the wet coat itself, there seemed to be some other reason perhaps.

"Ohoh, found it! Use this... A-Are you okay?"

Haruaki spoke as he held out his handkerchief. Only then did the girl look down casually at herself as if it did not concern her. Staring blankly for a few seconds—

"...Doesn't matter, it's just wet."

Drenched to this degree, most people would not say "Doesn't matter," right?

Having said that, she continued to stand there in a daze. Thinking "what a strange girl" to himself, Haruaki sort of forced her to grip the handkerchief in her hand.

"Use this to wipe it a bit... Oh, but before that, it'd be better to take it off first. Although perhaps it's already too late..."

After thinking for a while, she shook her head. Eh~ Is that really okay? Under Haruaki's gaze, the girl sluggishly wiped her coat with the handkerchief, even though taking it off would clearly be much better.

"I am really sorry! Of course, I'll pay you back for the cleaning fee! Oh no~ That's not enough, however? Your clothes underneath must have gotten dirty as well... Right, I'll lend you my bathroom for a shower!"

"But Saitou-san, don't you have an appointment at the animal hospital?"

"Right. But it's all my dog's fault... Can't help it, I guess I'll have to cancel the appointment."

Saitou-san was just about to take out his cellphone when Haruaki said to him:

"Oh, don't worry, I'll lend her the bathroom at my place. You'll be busy from now on, right? Besides, getting a makeup appointment immediately might not be that easy, so it's better to go while you still can."

"But I feel very bad about causing you trouble, Haruaki-kun. Clearly it wasn't your fault at all..."

"Oh~ I wouldn't say it's totally not my fault... This person here forcing the girl to hold the dog is the real reason..."

"I-It's my fault? I thought it would be nice and she seemed happy too!"

Although Octavianus was the main culprit, a portion of the responsibility stemmed from Fear, so Haruaki could not allow himself to just say "Okay, bye!" and leave. Haruaki strenuously pushed Fear's head away and said:

"Yeah it's like that, so don't worry! In fact, why don't I wash her clothes as well, just leave it all to me!"

No... But... However... Saitou-san hesitated but the appointment was approaching. In the end, he could only accept Haruaki's suggestion. "If there's any problem, contact me!" He wrote down his telephone number on a piece of paper and stuffed into the girl's hand. Bowing his head apologetically, he departed.

"Hmph, what an excessively nice guy—Although I knew that a long time ago. What's wrong with trying to make things easy for yourself...?"

"Hey Fear, what are you muttering to yourself about? Let's go home now!"

"Sh-Shut up, it's nothing! Okay, you too, hurry and come!"

"...?"

"Were you listening? ...Apparently not. You can't go home like this, right? You can borrow my home's bathroom and washing machine, so just come with us first. It's really close."

"No need, it doesn't matter."

What kind of person says something like that with this kind of appearance?

"Of course it matters! 'How could you let a girl go home alone in such a state? I'm going to give you a good lecture!' Back home, there's a person who would nag angrily like that."

"Even if you take her home, she'll probably still get angry."

"Hmm, it's possible... But anyway, pretend you're helping me, I hope you can come with us. Oh yeah, unless it happens that your home is super close to here?"

She shook her head.

"Or perhaps, you have a friend nearby to lend you a bathroom?"

Another shake of the head.

"Then you can only come to my house. Let's go!"

"Don't worry, we're not going to capture you and eat you. Instead, we'll offer you dinner? Although I'm not the one preparing the meal, it's this excessively nice guy here."

Haruaki and Fear turned around halfway to wait for the girl's reply. After a moment, the girl finally gave in and bowed with her head down.

"...I am in your care."

Then she began to walk slowly. Thinking what a severely shy girl she was, Haruaki suddenly realized he had forgotten something important.

"I'm Yachi Haruaki and she's Fear. What's your name?"

This was merely a very normal introduction.

An exceedingly ordinary ritual during encounters.

But for some reason, the girl answered quietly with a voice carrying the intense gloom from earlier:

"...Tateoka... Aiko."

Chapter 1 - Already Present Before One Could Notice / "A pebble, a pebble and more pebbles"

Part 1

Caution was of paramount importance.

As careful as a ninja searching for presences on the ceiling, as bold as a thief who had to finish the job within a matter of minutes—That was what Haruaki's mission demanded.

"Recently, it seems like I keep running into these inconvenient coincidences... Let's hope I can get through today peacefully...!"

He pressed his ear against the bathroom door to check out the situation inside. Despite the instant sense of guilt surfacing akin to that of a voyeur's, this was a necessary precaution. It was not like he could just enter the changing area suddenly. Even suicidal behavior had limits.

The continuous noise of water from the shower head could be heard from the other side. Although it was a slightly imposed invitation, but the girl—Aiko—did indeed enter the bath area. In that case, Haruaki was definitely able to avoid the "accidental intrusion in the process of changing" cliche... The next challenge was speed. Haruaki definitely had to avoid what happened with Fear and Kuroe last time, "running into them just as they exited the bath."

Surveying the surroundings, Haruaki did not spot anyone else in the corridor. Fear could be heard watching television in the den. Kuroe was most likely still at the shop. Meanwhile, Konoha was making dinner in the kitchen... If possible, Haruaki really wanted to swap duties with her, but Konoha was currently working on her original meat dish recipe so it could not be helped. Haruaki's pride prevented himself from meddling in other people's cooking and ruining the balance of flavor.

Hence, there was no one else who could undertake this dangerous mission. That article of clothing must be washed as soon as possible because every second counted, otherwise the stain might never be cleaned off...!

Taking a deep breath, Haruaki invaded the changing area at once. He swiveled his neck swiftly to confirm the situation. Then removed clothing was lying in the laundry basket.

(I clearly asked her to throw it into the washing machine... Whatever!)

Ignoring the sight of the small piece of white fabric and pushing other stuff to the side, Haruaki targeted the most soiled article—the coat. Fishing out the coat from the bottom—

"So heavy!"

The coat dangled with great weight. What on earth made it so heavy? Upon careful examination, Haruaki found the reason, the objects stuffed into the innumerable pockets—pebbles.

"...?"

They were ordinary pebbles no matter how you looked at them. Nothing special about their shape, nor were the colors particularly pretty... Yet another mystery was added to this strange girl's repertoire. However, these pebbles could not be allowed into the washing machine, so Haruaki took them all out and threw the lightened coat into the machine. As for the coat, it was luckily one of those rare types with a label saying "machine washable," but one still had to be extra careful when washing large articles of clothing. After cautiously measuring out the laundry detergent and pouring it in, Haruaki then deftly switched laundry modes and pressed the on button. With a trusty rumbling noise, the modern product of convenience started up.

"What should I do with these things? Although I've no idea what is going on, let's just leave them here!"

Haruaki piled up the pebbles in the sink and swiftly withdrew from the changing area. Mission accomplished.

"Wow, I succeeded... Peacefully without incident!"

What was up with the current home situation where his own bathroom had become a danger zone? As this thought suddenly flashed across his mind, Haruaki decided to dismiss it for now. Now, let me savor the value of a miraculous survival...!

Haruaki casually made a victory gesture just as he exited to the corridor. Just at that moment, a faint "...Hweh~" sound was heard from the other side of the changing area's closed door behind him. Apparently, he had missed Aiko leaving the bathing area by the slimmest of margins. That was

close. However, Haruaki had already escaped from the danger zone, so the possibility of Fear or Konoha's cold stares was eliminated—

Yeah right.

Clack—! The room to the changing area was opened.

"...!"

"Wha...!"

Aiko rushed out half-naked, with only a blouse over her upper torso. Under the hems of the white blouse, the snow-white complexion of her legs was exposed in full vulnerability. Hitherto unseen because they were hidden beneath the long coat, her legs were long and slender, well-proportioned like a model's. A further problem was Konoha's pair of panties that had been prepared for her along with the blouse, which was now flashing in and out of view between her legs—

"W-What's the matter? Is there any problem? Could you put on your clothes first, because this is a huge problem for me!"

"...There's a problem."

Aiko frantically tugged Haruaki's clothes. Her strength was unexpectedly strong, thus causing Haruaki to be dragged into the changing area. Back in a difficult predicament, Haruaki's gaze began to wander in avoidance of her half-dressed state.

"Hey, what on earth is going on? Like I said, put on your clothes first!"

"...Clothes... Where?"

"D-Didn't we prepare them for you already? Uh—my cousin's clothes are all clean and washed, really!"

"No, I mean the ones I wore when I came."

"Oh, the coat is currently in the wash. See? Isn't the washing machine spinning right there?"

What, so it was about that... As Haruaki was thinking of answering, Aiko did something he never expected. Frantically, she went over to the washing machine and opened the lid, reaching in without regard for the spinning motion to drag out the dripping wet coat.

"Hey, are you an idiot? That's very dangerous! Oh, you actually want to wear it? How much do you like this coat, really?"

"...I want to wear it."

"You'll catch a cold if you wear it like this! Listen to me, take it off now, quickly!"

"No, I won't take it off... Hweh?"

As Haruaki began a tug-of-war with Aiko over the coat, she suddenly stopped and inclined her head.

"...Where's the things inside?"

"The things inside? Oh, you mean those pebbles? I took them out because they can't go in the wash."

"...Hweh~"

Aiko relaxed her grip and Haruaki seized the opportunity to pull the coat to his hands. Really, what the heck? Thinking that to himself, he tossed the coat into the washing machine and turned his gaze back to Aiko—

She was crying.

Still hidden behind her wet bangs, her expression was out of view but she was definitely crying. Because tears could be seen flowing down from under her bangs.

"Woah! What's the matter, what happened? Y-You really hate having this coat washed? But since it's soiled, you can't wear it unless it's cleaned—"

"...That's not right."

"...What's not right?"

She did not answer but quietly sobbing could be heard from her nose and throat. How troubling.

"Ah~ Umm, I don't quite get it, but what do you want me to do? Listen carefully, this cannot remain dirty so I must wash it. Apart from that, I'll do anything for you."

"...Really?"

"Really, absolutely."

Despite her apparent age, Aiko's personality was surprisingly like a child's, or perhaps a small animal? What a strange girl—Only now did such an assessment surface in Haruaki's mind. As soon as he spoke, Aiko gripped Haruaki's hand lightly.

"W-What?"

"Lend me for a bit."

Incomprehensible. What did she want to do? Thinking that, Haruaki watched as Aiko lifted his hand—

And stuffed it into the breast pocket of the blouse she was wearing.

"...!"

The blouse was worn directly over bare skin. Haruaki could feel the beating of her heart through the single layer of fabric. Of course, being the breast pocket, beneath it was a bulge, beautifully shaped despite being inferior to Konoha in size... No wait, now was not the time to be thinking about such things! The cramped feeling in the pocket was turning into an illusion of intimate contact with her skin, progressively tightening—

"...Pwa~"

In spite of Haruaki whose mind was in turmoil, Aiko made a sound as if greatly satisfied. The atmosphere felt as if they were submerged in a hot spring up to their shoulders, filled with a comforting sense of relief. At this moment, Aiko's warm breath woke Haruaki to a start, prompting him to muster his entire willpower to withdraw his hand from her pocket.

"I-I don't get what's going on, but that should be enough, right? Is it?"

"...Yeah, I'm pretty much satisfied."

"R-Really? That's great. Then this time, please put on your clothes properly and come to the living room."

After saying that, Haruaki was just about to exit the changing area when he heard a voice from behind.

"The pebbles?"

"They're in the sink over there... Are they very important?"

"No, I use them for filling my pockets, that's all."

This young lady made a strange comment again.

"Fine..... Do whatever you want as long as you don't break the pockets.
What is the point of doing that anyway..."

Haruaki's final sentence was more like muttering to himself than asking for an answer. But just as he was about to close the door, Aiko replied quietly.

"...Because, emptiness fills me with uneasiness."

Already back in the living room were Fear, Konoha in her apron, as well as Kuroe who had returned home at some point. The trio was bent over the dining table, gathered together to watch something. Haruaki could catch a vague glimpse of what appeared to be... Kuroe's cellphone...?

"Listen to me, take it off now, quickly!"

"No, I won't take it off..."

...This dialogue sounded strangely familiar. What was going on?

Hearing his own voice, Haruaki felt a strange sense of dissonance—He escaped reality.

"Oh dear~ It really gave me quite a fright. I never expected I'd come across this rare recording moment as soon as I came home. This good fortune must be a sign of the abundant good deeds I perform every day? By the way, this part has sound only, but we'll soon reach the part when I successfully opened the door in secret to catch what was happening inside. Don't worry!"

"Sh-Shameless! Let me say this again, utterly shameless!"

"W-Wha... W-Wha..."

"Kono-san, the plate has been sliced into two. Be careful or you'll split the table in half. Hmm, the sound isn't very clear for this part... But we're almost getting there... Oh! Hurry and watch this, today's shocking scene!"

"...Pwa~"

Aiko was making a sound of satisfaction. In other words, the image on the screen was—

"Wait a minute, this is wrong, it's not like that!"

Fear and Konoha turned their heads in such a way it sounded as if their necks were creaking. Konoha smiled and waved to Haruaki while Fear took out her Rubik's cube and started turning it noisily as if showing off,

Only Kuroe raised her hand nonchalantly, going "Hi, I'm home." Since she was present during the recording, she clearly understood exactly what had occurred. Nevertheless, she did not show any intention to explain for the other two girls... She was definitely waiting for a good show.

This home really needs some anti-harassment legislation drafted—Wishing sincerely to himself, Haruaki sighed deeply as he imagined the effort it would take to explain everything next.

Part 2

In front of the Hitsutou City's train station, inside a room of a certain hotel—

There was a father and a mother. Their "numerous children" were not present.

A man sat with a woman on the bed side as he combed her long hair. Gently, very gently, he combed.

"How is your body's condition?"

The voice was filled with thoughtful consideration. The mother answered happily:

"Not bad, but it seems like I shouldn't strain myself."

"Then that is most wonderful—Praise the Lord... One would surely say? In any case, there is no need for you to strain yourself. I'm here this time and furthermore, we even have a new 'daughter.'"

"Nikaidou Kururi-san—That's her name, yes? In your view, how is she?"

"If one were to compare her to the existing members of the Family—She is not as powerful as Oratorie Rabdulmunagh or Hinai Elsie. Neither is she as cunning as Marion Entwistle. Basically, she is ordinary."

"Ara ara, you are saying she is an 'ordinary murderer'?"

"However, her movements are very keen and swift. Perhaps naturally gifted, she was able to move immediately after being liberated from that 'incident'... At the very least, she won't be a burden."

"Since you put in all that effort to welcome her, it would be troublesome if she still turned out to be a burden—Anyway, I still have not heard you explain in detail. When you were bringing her out of the juvenile penitentiary, did anything happen?"

Without stopping his combing motions, the man shrugged lightly:

"The task itself, of persuading her, finished quickly. But there was some trouble when retrieving her beloved Wathe from the police's evidence vault. That's why I was late to pick you up at the rendezvous point last time—I ran into someone from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion."

"Ara, showing up to destroy my beloved Wathes again, what a bunch of villains."

The woman raised her pitch half-jokingly. The man half-closed one eye as he watched her. Putting down the comb on the mattress, he stroked her head as though he were comforting a child.

"It can't be helped. Once the case went public, it would inevitably come to their attention. That said, the other side had not expected my arrival, hence the one they sent was an auxiliary of little threat—But herein lies the problem. I had the auxiliary make a 'confession,' and found out that another person has also arrived in this town. The man known as the One-Man Force: «Isolate», a first-class exterminating knight in the vanguard."

"Why did he come?"

"Naturally, to find a way to deal with the Fear-in-Cube. Taking care of the Wathe from Kururi's incident was apparently just an afterthought."

The hand originally stroking her head slid naturally down to the woman's cheek. Facing the happily smiling woman, the man smiled back in the same way and said:

"Is it really okay not to bring Oratorie or Hinai along?"

"They have their own tasks... Tasks that must be done now. Tasks which they might be asked to do in the future. That, too, is very important. On the other hand, Kururi-san seems to be trying hard, besides..."

The woman inclined her head slightly and kissed the fingertip sliding along her face. Her lips sang like a little bird.

"I have you. This alone is enough to reassure me completely."

"Praise the Lord, I shall commit these blissful words of yours to memory. But let me confirm first, must we invite Fear-in-Cube to our Family by any means necessary? As the current situation stands, you are not at peak condition and there is potential interference from the Knights' Dominion. I don't think we should stretch ourselves. Why are you so obsessed with Fear-in-Cube?"

"...To be honest, I have no idea why. However, I knew on first sight that I must love her like family no matter what. Yes—simply stated, this is my willfulness on whim. Is that unacceptable...?"

Adjusting her monocle, the woman looked up at the man, with her disconcerted but trusting eyes. The man's beard shook slightly:

"How could it be unacceptable? If it is your wish, I have no reason to refuse. I think it goes without saying, I exist for human salvation."

"I understand, my beloved cross... Thank you."

The sound of lips was heard again. This time, instead of a finger, they were directed towards the most suitable target.

"Very well, how should we proceed exactly?"

The woman looked up at the ceiling as though she recalled something. Then like an adorable maiden, she rested her index finger against her lips where residual warmth still lingered and said:

"In the last incident—Watching those girls try so hard, I wondered if I should change my mind a little? Although I had stated I was uninterested, perhaps I was wrong. Yes... Since it is something that they treasure so much, we should respect that seeing as we love them. Previously, we may have over neglected him."

"Oh? Then in other words..."

The mother smiled. Alice Bivorio Basskreigh smiled.

Here in this place, no one was aware that she was missing a certain crucial element decisively as a person—at least, no "human being" knew—There were none present whatsoever.

"Yes. First of all... Why don't you guide that young man to make a confession?"

Part 3

As though she were imitating someone, Kuroe remarked in a somewhat hollow tone:

"Uwah~ A burning hell of meat."

The dining table was laden with Konoha's elaborate cooking. It seemed to be centered around sukiyaki hot pot, supplemented with many of her original dishes—it was literally "sukiyaki," which meant "cooking only what you like."

Spreading out from the middle of the pot was a brown and undulating terrain, namely, a passionate continent of meat. The little hills shook from the bubbling simmering as white steam rose like miasma, surging forth from underground through crevices in the land. What exactly lay underneath? Perhaps there was nothing at all, or a swamp of scorching broth, or a hidden second layer, another world of meat like the first—

Haruaki's desperate insistence of the bathroom incident as a misunderstanding seemed to be taking effect. Finally back in good spirits, Konoha thumped her chest and declared:

"You could try dipping it in raw egg sauce~ But since I already added some spicy flavoring, I think the meat is fine as is. Come, Haruaki-kun, please enjoy!"

"Oh... Okay, thanks for the food."

Receiving the plate she handed over, Haruaki gulped hard. If possible, he wanted to calm himself down first, starting with the salad he had prepared, but there was no choice now... Steeling his mind, he used his chopsticks to pick up a corner of the meat mountain and slowly delivered it to his mouth. His reaction was—

"Good... It's delicious!"

"Really? I'm so glad! Ufufu!"

"Chomp chomp chomp. Hmph, just as always, you prepare food that faithfully recreates your figure. Stuffy, a sore sight and ugly, furthermore—Feels greasy and blub blub in texture."

"W-What's with your onomatopoeia and descriptions? If you have any objections, don't eat it!"

Konoha glared murderously in retort. Fear simply snorted and reached towards the pot with her chopsticks again. This was always how their conversations went, so there was nothing for Haruaki to be concerned about. Kuroe gazed blankly and remarked "A protein cataclysm!" or something like that as she kept delivering pieces of meat into her mouth, one after another.

Haruaki glanced at Aiko who was sitting opposite to Fear at the dining table. Since her laundry could not finish that quickly, he invited her to have dinner together while she was here. However, she simply held her chopsticks as she stared timidly at Fear and the girls. Was she frozen by shyness?

"Come on, you eat some too! It's very tasty."

As Haruaki forced some meat onto Aiko's plate, she looked at his face and slowly brought the meat to her mouth. Then like a small animal, she nibbled from the edge and chewed in her mouth.

"...Very tasty."

"Wow, thank you very much~ Ehehe, I feel so happy for my cooking to be praised by someone I am meeting for the first time! Don't be shy, please eat as much as you want!"

Yes—Nodding slightly, Aiko began to reach towards the pot on her own initiative. Sitting around a dining table with strangers, anyone would be nervous in this kind of situation, right? But dispelling this sort of tension was precisely the effect of a situation like the dining table.

"What do you mean, eat as much as you want? That's a totally irresponsible statement! Clearly if you eat meat, you'll end up with meat all over your body!"

Hearing Fear's outburst, Kuroe was shaken slightly and reacted:

"Ah! Ficchi~ You speak true words... Isn't this our salvation...!?"

Despite Kuroe's dramatic tone of voice and expression, Fear was oblivious and shook her head seriously—Meanwhile, Aiko inclined her head in puzzlement as she extracted udon noodles from the depths of the land of meat. Staring and troubled by the long and extending noodle, she went "...Hmm~" as she raised her chopsticks sky high. Apparently, the double hell of "meat under meat" did not come true.

"Don't be hasty, Kuroe, meat does not necessarily grow where you want it to. This lab rat of a failed experiment lies before your eyes... Ah yes, this is the fate of fools who were devoured by greed. To us, bathroom scales might be nothing to be alarmed about, but in her eyes, it must be quite the device of demons, right?"

"A double-edged sword, huh..."

"You two—! If you don't behave yourselves, I really won't let you eat anymore!"

Amidst the usual commotion, Aiko slowly and leisurely remarked "...It's lengthening" as she continued pulling the udon noodle with a posture akin to a judo shoulder throw.

"By the way, there's something that's bothering me."

Fear's new conversation began just as she was biting into her second after-dinner rice cracker. Crunch crunch crunch... Roughly a third of the way into her rice cracker, she chewed as she spoke:

"Doesn't this girl smell kind of funny?"

"...Hweh~"

"What are you saying all of a sudden? Isn't that a rude thing to say to a girl—And she just took a shower, she shouldn't smell bad anymore, right?"

"That's right. Sorry, please don't mind her."

"No. It's not what the dog did... Rather, I should say it's her own smell... Drats, I can't express it clearly. Hey, you come over and let me have a sniff."

"...?"

Before Aiko could answer in her puzzlement, Fear approached her on all fours, bringing her face close to Aiko's neck and began sniffing. This was

apparently not enough and she even placed her hand on Aiko's shoulder as if about to climb over her, sniffing repeatedly around her throat. Blushing to her ears, Aiko bent forwards and waved her hands frantically.

"...Au au."

"Muu, it's really bothering me, but I can't understand it. Hey, Kuroe, you come over for a look as well."

"I don't understand either, but it sounds like fun, so I'll comply~ Sniff... Hmm~hmm~"

Kuroe approached Aiko from the side and with eyes closed, brought her face against Aiko's ear. Aiko blushed even more intensely.

"Hey, what are you two doing?"

"Wait a sec, this girl really is a bit weird. Cow Tits, you come and help too!"

"W-Why do I have to as well? Isn't Aiko-san really troubled!? Stop it right now—"

"Cow Tits."

Fear looked up for a glance and simply addressed Konoha again. As if feeling something from that, Konoha narrowed her eyes and stood up after a while. Coming over to Aiko who was being continuously harassed by Fear and Kuroe, Konoha dropped to her knees—

"Uh... My apologies, Aiko-san. This will only take a short while... Sniff... Hmm? Hmm mmm mmm?"

"See? It's weird, right?"

"Apart from weird, there is a very fragrant smell. Sniff~"

"That's the smell of soap, Kuroe. Please focus on the strange smell."

"Why? Although I know it's strange, there's a subtle feeling causing agitation in the depths of my heart—"

"...Hweh~ A-Au..."

Struggling under the weight of the three girls, Aiko had somehow collapsed onto the tatami floor. Her cheeks burning bright red, her breathing irregular. For some reason, the trio was sniffing her scent as if mesmerized, their

noses pointed arbitrarily at different places. Fear's face showed suspicion, Konoha was frowning while Kuroe seemed quite delighted. Perhaps tickled by the breath against her skin, Alko groaned "Nnnngg...!" Then the skirt she borrowed from Konoha was flipped slightly to reveal her long and beautiful legs—

"L-Like I said~ What is with you girls!? Even Konoha is acting like this! Break it up! In any case, break it up now!"

Red in the face, Haruaki pulled Fear and the others away. Regaining her freedom, Aiko curled herself into a ball as if greatly ashamed and righted her skirt hem—For some reason, Haruaki felt an intense sense of guilt in his heart.



"Umuu~ I don't really get how it works, but it's really that, right?"

"Yeah, I think so too."

"It's possible to tell by scent, that does happen... In that case, we should just ask directly, okay?"

Fear and the girls huddled together in whispers and slowly turned their gaze towards Aiko. Acting as their representative, Fear approached and asked Aiko who was curling up even more in fright.

To Haruaki, this was completely unexpected—But somehow, it was a question he could understand on some level.

"You... Are you one of our kind? Although it's purely based on instinct, that's what your smell tells me."

There was a moment of silence before answering, but the bangs concealing Aiko's eyes quivered—She nodded.

"...Hmm. But..."

"But?"

Konoha asked slightly nervously. Timidly, Aiko lowered her head even more and said:

"I... think... I'm not supposed to stink, right..."

Due to Aiko's strange behavior so far, Haruaki already had a nagging suspicion. This was something that only Haruaki would develop, due to his daily contact with the girls. Sure enough—Accepting Aiko's identity with such a comment in his mind, the after-dinner moment of tea suddenly turned into a interview regarding Aiko's origins.

Konoha had initially stared at Aiko nervously because of the many recent incidents—But all of a sudden, she dispelled her vigilant gaze. Aiko's arrival was accidental and was indirectly caused by Fear forcing her to hold Octavianus. At the same time, Haruaki was the direct cause due to dragging her home as an imposed apology. Besides, more than enough time had passed for her to make a move had she intended to. It was quite difficult to imagine any hostility coming from this girl who acted like a small animal.

Using her hair to refill Aiko's teacup for no reason at all, Kuroe watched in amusement to see her taken aback in surprise. Haruaki rewarded Kuroe with a light karate chop to the head and said:

"Uh... How should I say this? To be honest, this only surprises me to the level of 'Oh~ I see'... In any case, these girls are all the same as you, so please understand that first of all."

She nodded—A motion expressing understanding. Fear interjected at this point:

"So Aiko, 'what' are you?"

Aiko's shoulders shuddered and she spoke:

"...I don't want to say."

Without looking at the frowning Fear, Konoha tilted her head backwards and drank from her teacup.

"Fear-san, would you be so bold as to tell others what you are yourself?"

"Hmm—This... How should I explain? I was just curious on a whim. If you don't want to tell me, it's fine."

Fear lowered her gaze guiltily. Feeling Aiko becoming depressed all at once, Haruaki hastily changed the subject:

"But anyway, to be invited to my house by coincidence... To think something like that would happen... In that case, what were you doing there?"

"...Nothing at all."

"Nothing at... Were you taking a walk?"

"Yes—Because there is no place for me to go. I'm always wandering around casually, like traveling."

"Yay, a fellow traveler! Traveling is the greatest!"

Kuroe nodded with her blank gaze. Fear again picked up the rice cracker she was about to eat:

"No place to go, so that means you don't have a particular owner?"

"Yes. Because it will cause people trouble, it's better this way."

Fear stopped moving for an instant and turned her face unhappily for some reason. Resting her head against the dining table, she stuffed her face with rice crackers and chewed anxiously. "Oh... That must have been quite tough to suffer through, to think you were able to endure..." Haruaki heard her murmuring to herself.

These girls possessed the dual natures of humans and tools simultaneously. Hence, these two natures would interact and affect each other.

In the same way a human could recover naturally from minor injuries, damage incurred in their tool forms could also self-repair naturally to a certain extent—Conversely, even after taking human form, they would still feel tool-like desires such as "wanting to be used by someone." This was the unavoidable karma known as "ownership desire."

Furthermore, suppressing this desire was apparently quite a painful experience. Enduring hunger, enduring sleeplessness, even enduring lack of air... In any case, it would be like suppressing the three major human desires! Haruaki recalled Konoha telling him in the past. When exactly, he could not remember.

(In that case—It must be really as Fear described, Aiko must be in great suffering, right? And for her to insist on doing so—)

Only one reason came to mind.

Fear remained pouting, her fingertips drumming on the dining table; Konoha sighed for some reason; Kuroe stared blankly as always.

"Ahhh... I can already guess how this will develop. I've already given up, sigh..."

"Hmph, being an excessively nice guy is an incurable disease. But I don't think he even wants to have it treated."

"There will be even more embarrassing moments to be caught from now on. Perhaps it's time for me to invest in a new digital camera."

"Hey, what are you girls talking about?"

"Nothing much. Of course it's nothing."

Pouting slightly with her eyes closed, Konoha bowed and gestured with her open palms towards Aiko like a server welcoming a customer.

"I'm not going to stop you, Haruaki-kun, so do as you wish. You must have something to tell Aiko-san, right?"

"H-How did you know? No, hmm... Since she has nowhere to go, there's no problem with staying in my home... That's basically the idea. How's that?"

He could catch Fear and Konoha sighing simultaneously. Aiko looked up in surprise, staring intently towards Haruaki's group—Although her hair covered her eyes, that was probably what she was doing.

"Yeah, I guess you're probably quite troubled to hear this so suddenly, right? Uh... Where should I start explaining...?"

"So Aiko, maybe you might find it unbelievable, but this shameless brat is actually immune to curses. Also, all we need to lift our curses are positive thoughts from humans. Furthermore, this home happens to be—Simply stated, it is precisely the place for lifting curses."

"Yes, we are all here for that purpose... However, mine is already almost lifted, while Kuroe-san is—"

"My curse is already lifted. To me, this place is like my parental home."

Unexpectedly, Fear and the girls helped to explain. It was quite helpful of them to be willing to provide assistance, but what was with their sulking attitude just now... Haruaki really could not understand.

"Yeah, that's how it is here. How about it?"

Aiko looked down again. As seconds turned into minutes, a moment of silence was created.

Haruaki found it a little unbelievable. Although he understood how it was impossible for her to trust immediately—But normally, cursed tools should be quite eager to lift their curses. Disregarding special cases like Sovereignty, Aiko already said she had no owner, so there should not be anything to deliberate over, right?

However—Haruaki thought to himself. She should realize these were not lies. Sitting around the same dining table, sharing the same food, she should have already understood how Fear and the girls lived in this home. Therefore, surely she would—

Then after the time it took for Haruaki to take ten breaths...

Aiko nodded extremely slowly.

Haruaki felt relaxed as if he had breathed a sigh of relief.

"Great, it's decided. Rather than wandering around aimlessly, this is definitely better... Hmm~ Although even if you had an owner, I'd still try offering you an invitation. Let's get along together from now on, Aiko."

"...Yes."

"Since the master of the house said so, I have no objections. But are you okay on the money side of things?"

"You never care about that normally, why would you suddenly say that only now... Hmm, it should be okay. In actual fact, Old Pops started transferring a little more money this month. That stupid Old Pops, did it finally occur to him to consider the situation here?"

"Muu, then it's decided, that! Didn't you mention about giving me an allowance? How about it?"

"I never said anything like that! Don't fabricate memories!"

Fear argued noisily; Konoha sighed in exasperation; Kuroe stirred things up from the said in amusement.

This was a scene unfolding as usual in this home. Amongst it all, Haruaki noticed.

Joining this family as its newest member, Aiko had not smiled all this time.

Extremely shy and a little timid as she was, perhaps this could not be helped. One day, she will surely smile—He thought to himself. Haruaki hoped to see her smile.

But currently she still could not smile.

As though she was still wondering whether she allowed herself to do so—

She did not smile.

Part 4

Empty space was sealed up. With that, the space became herself.

This was the meaning of her existence. She existed for this purpose. For this purpose, she had no choice but to exist—That was what guided her existence.

Even with no expectations—even with no expectations—Only this conferred meaning unto her existence.

Noises appeared within the sealed space.

Existences of flesh made noises from their throats. Their numbers were uncertain. More than ten, less than a hundred. But the number of times these many many many many noises were made on their own, this quantity could be clearly expressed with one word—Countless.

Low snarls transmitted malice. Trembling expressed fear. Breathing conveyed confusion. Rhythmic motions told of excitement. Basically, noises, noises, noises—the noises of wild beasts being kept.

Fulfill the meaning of your existence—Given these orders, she had approached them.

Lightly, she reached her hand towards a furry body to create a new sound.

—Puchz

A slight fraction of the countless noises disappeared, replaced by a one-time sound. Within the sealed space, the sound of life extinguishing echoed incredibly, but immediately, it was diluted by the countless other noises that grew louder.

The narrow space was filled with the sounds of the crazed as they attempted to flee. The density was akin to that of the tangible walls. She continued in compliance with orders, advancing forwards as she sliced apart the wall of hostility and pleading, repeating again and again.

The sounds of crimes were heard repeatedly.

Puchz, puchz—even without expectation, still—, puchzFinished.

But this was not the end.

On the floorboards, which had been dyed by a certain red-black substance, lay the remains of furred creatures of various colors.

Oh of course, she had no choice but to do it. It was the meaning of her existence.

The absolute and only—

Purpose of an object like her.

Hence, even if she harbored no expectations—even without any expectations—

"...!"

She woke at this time.

It was the dark interior of a Japanese-style room. Confirming her location, Aiko found herself sitting up from her futon and reaching out ambiguously in the air with her hand. Did she enter this posture after waking up, or was it already like this during her sleep? She had no idea.

Exhaling lightly, she slowly withdrew her outstretched arm. Gently, she caressed her borrowed clothes—the pebbles stuffed in her breast pocket. Although another set of clothes had been prepared for her as pajamas, she did not wear them because they lacked pockets.

She hated that feeling of emptiness inside.

However, were it not empty—and then filled with what it was meant to contain—she would not like it either.

Confronted with her contradictory feelings, she sighed again. Her hand remaining in contact with the solid sensation, she slowly lay back into the futon.

Eyes closed, she pondered questions.

Was it acceptable? Was this allowed? Was it really fine for her to stay here—

After all, she had sinned. All this time, she had been sinning.

Although she had arrived at this home by mere coincidence, she found it to be a very great place. It would be truly wonderful she could continue living here and lift her curse.

However, even so—She was—

The warmth of the futon felt very comfortable. But she thought to herself, was indulging in this comfort really acceptable?

Was it okay? Was it really okay? She asked herself repeatedly.

While sinking into deep and profound sleep, she made a wish.

Oh, how nice it would be if only she could forget everything.

If she were no longer herself, how nice that would be.

If that wish were not possible, at least—

Even if I fall asleep, please don't let me dream the continuation of that dream—

However, dreams were harsh and merciless. Even this modest wish could not be fulfilled.

As if waiting for her to return to slumber, the previous scene continued to play.

A closed world. Red floorboards. Only one creature remained. She was just about to fulfill her purpose.

In this space where the other noises had vanished, all that remained were the cries of that helpless little animal.

Whimper, whimper, whimper...

—Puchz

Part 5

Night passed and Sunday arrived.

The sports festival was going to be held the next day—Monday. Final preparations for the festival were already completed on Saturday afternoon. Hence, Sunday was supposed to be an important day of rest to save up energy for the following day—At least, that was the original plan.

But for some reason, the kitchen counter had become an intense battlefield.

"Nuoooooooo!"

Clack clack.

"...So cold."

Squeak, squeak, squeak.

Watching the two girls working from behind, Haruaki sighed. Taking a dish, Fear washed it with lightning speed. Then with a mighty roar, she shoved the dish forcefully into the kitchenware rack, turned around and smiled fearlessly.

"How's that! Did you see it, Haruaki!?"

"Yeah I saw it! Disqualified!"

"W-What? Why!?"

"Too sloppy! Look here, see the detergent still remaining on the back... Didn't I mention just now? Speed is good and all, but being careful and thorough is more important!"

Uuwuu... As Fear gnashed her teeth reluctantly, Aiko also finished her dishes. "...Done." Although her initial motions were unfamiliar, dish washing was essentially a simple task anyone could do with patience and care. The dishes Aiko washed were sparkling clean and their sight caused Fear's sulking face to worsen.

After breakfast, Haruaki had invited Aiko to practice washing dishes as a chance to improve her intimacy and familiarity with the home. Haruaki's careless praise of "Wow, amazing, that's the way to go!" had apparently set fire to Fear's competitive spirit. Without any intention to compete, Aiko simply did things at her own pace. Thus, the one-sided dish washing war began.

"Damn it, next event! Give me something to do, Haruaki! Today, I'm filled with the mood to practice housework!"

"Now that's an amazing mood. Aiko, would you like to continue?"

"...Yes, I'm quite free after all."

"Nuuu~ So you're saying the dish washing race bored you to tears just now...? Damn it...!"

Knock! Haruaki's karate chop landed lightly on the silver-colored head.

"Hey, don't make strange interpretations. If you won't get along with her, I won't let you help!"

"I-I am getting along with her well! However, my body is brimming with this concentrated mass of desire for self-improvement..."

"Yes yes~ Then next, I'll teach you how to clean the house. No need to use the vacuum cleaner. Grab a cleaning cloth and wait for me at the veranda!"

"Nothing I could want more! Hoho, let me show her my dignity as her senior...!"

Fear rushed out of the kitchen. Aiko tilted her head incredulously but also followed after her.

(I see... For Fear, this is her first time to have junior... So she wants to show off her cool side... Is that the rough idea? But...)

Why?

Haruaki could not imagine any scene when Fear had looked cool.

After the cleaning, Haruaki announced a break for the girls as his face twitched. "Go take a break! There are no chores for you to do so impatiently!" There were more or less still other things to be done, but the situation was getting out of hand. Fear returned to her room and was changing into something easier to move in.

"Jeez... That shameless brat, he's biased, that was definitely biased of him!"

Recalling the light karate chop on her head just now, Fear made a sour look. Because the stain on the pillar could not be wiped off no matter how hard she tried, Fear had planned on using «A Hatchet of Lingchi» to shave off the surface to make the pillar all pretty again. What on earth was wrong with that...?

Then Fear recalled how Aiko was sluggishly wiping the veranda's floorboards with her cloth—thereby prompting her memory of Haruaki's stupid face as he praised Aiko: "Wow, you're very mindful, it's great!" Fear's fury erupted further. Sitting down hard on the tatami, she gruffly shoved her legs into her shorts. Damn that Haruaki, he wouldn't even give me the chance to restore my honor! Had he given me the same task of

wiping the floor, I would have shown him the speed difference between a horse and tortoise, thereby defeating that girl...!

Muttering as she finished changing, Fear left her room. Dragging the boombox from a corner of the living room to the veranda, she then entered the garden.

The sports festival was officially going to be held tomorrow. Fear felt that she needed a final confirmation for her creative dance.

Barely managing to recall how to operate the device, she started playing the music. She began dancing with vigor as if it were the real event. Perhaps owing to the repeated practice, all those moves she had found difficult in the beginning could now be performed successfully for the most part.

After finishing one song—

"Hmph hmpf... Good, that went well. Then all I need to do is wait for tomorrow!"

Satisfied, Fear wiped the sweat off her brow, only to hear faint clapping. Looking up, she found Aiko sitting on the veranda. Did she come over to watch because she heard the music?

"...So amazing. You dance really well."

Although Aiko's expression was obscured as usual, the feeling of being praised was not bad. Fear originally had Aiko pegged as a reticent and unreadable girl, but now decided that Aiko had a forthright side to her.

"Want to see me repeat it again?"

Aiko nodded quickly multiple times.

"Hoho, very well. I was just thinking of practicing a bit more. Play the music!"

"...I don't know how."

"Press that button with the triangle on it."

"Oh I see. So knowledgeable of you."

"H-Hoho! Oh my~ I'm not that amazing!"

"By the way, what is this one with two triangles...?"

"That's—"

What was it?

"Two 'plays'... Double play, yes! For one press of the button to replay music from the past, such technology is already quite frightening already. Once it's doubled, even more astounding functions will be unleashed—Anyway, the double triangles will result in calamity! So don't touch it recklessly, umm... It's very dangerous, don't press it."

"...So scary. Here we go, triangle button."

The song began to play and Fear restarted her dance. Perhaps due to the presence of an audience, a shy yet happy feeling surged in Fear's heart, making her feel an incredible sense of excitement.

As her movements and the music came to an end, the sound of applause was heard again. At this time, Fear noticed that a tray with barley tea had suddenly appeared next to Aiko. But clearly Aiko should have been sitting there all along.

"...Uh... It was Haruaki who brought it."

"Muu, that's pretty smart of him. Then I'll forgive him for the unfair ruling in the competition earlier."

Sitting down in the veranda with Aiko whose head was tilted in puzzlement, Fear began drinking the ice-cold barley tea with her. The simple taste seeped and spread throughout Fear's body that was hot from the exercise. Aiko also went "...Pwah~" in satisfaction.

Pwah, after a brief break, just as Fear was refilling her cup, Aiko asked softly:

"...Dancing... Is that your hobby?"

"Muu? No, not really. The sports festival is tomorrow and I need to perform it then."

Sports festival? Aiko inclined her head in puzzlement.

"I heard that it's one of the festivals held by the school. This is my first experience as well... It appears to have many competitions such as running, jumping, dodgeball, and bread eating contests."

"...Sounds very fun."

"You should be able to go to school eventually. Do you like sports?"

"Doing it myself, not that much... But I like watching others play sports."

"Really? Hmm, Kuroe should be coming tomorrow anyway to cheer for us, you're coming too, right?"

"Yes, I want to go."

"Yes! Then the sight of my heroic figure shall be branded firmly upon your eyes... I promise you, I'll perform a great dance to celebrate your arrival!"

"...Thank you. Are you participating in other events?"

"Of course. Although Cow Tits and Haruaki nagged me about joining too many... Since number one is pretty much guaranteed if we go serious—"

Suddenly recalling something, Fear stopped midway. Seeing Aiko tilting her head in puzzlement, Fear thought to herself: It's probably best if I got this out of the way first.

"Umm... I'm sorry about yesterday."

"?"

"For suddenly asking about your true form. On further thought, I didn't tell Haruaki in the beginning either. I understand. It's not something happy to talk about."

"Fear... too?"

"Me too? I also... Haha, the fact is, I really don't want to talk about my true form either. I'm a tool whose purpose naturally causes others to curse me. When the time comes for you to tell me yours, I'll tell you mine, how's that?"

"Telling you... is fine. Because—"

Aiko had bowed her head at some point in time. As she shook her head slightly, one could see the sides of her face shrouded by the bottomless gloom she displayed on occasion—

"Because, I'm something similar to what you described as yourself, Fear."

"..."

What was it exactly? What was Aiko's true form? Just as Fear hesitated whether she should ask—

She heard the doorbell. Then two familiar voices could be heard coming from the entryway, although Fear could not tell what they were saying exactly.

"Kirika, and Kana as well...? I didn't know they were gonna visit."

"Your friends?"

"Pretty much."

Saying that, Fear jumped off the veranda and used her foot to fish out the communal sandals kept beneath the veranda.

"They're nice people. Let's go say hi!"

"...You're not going to ask about my true form?"

"Rather than discuss something that makes you unhappy, it'll be more fun to eat rice crackers with noisy friends."

"...Perhaps so... You may be right."

Putting on the sandals, Aiko also descended from the veranda. Along the way, circling around the house towards the entryway—

"But, surely I'm... Compared to Fear, I deserve even more to be cursed..."

Fear could vaguely hear murmurs of this sort coming from behind her.

There could not possibly exist anything that deserved to be cursed more than a torture tool whose only purpose was to torment and execute people. Although that was what Fear thought, this was the deplorable truth that Fear had no wish of divulging on her own accord. Hence, she pretended not to hear Aiko's murmurs.

Haruaki was working on his mathematics homework when he heard the doorbell. This laborious affair came from the mathematics substitute teacher who seemed to subscribe to the philosophy of "Sports festival? That has nothing to do with me!" Despite his gloomy demeanor, the previous mathematics teacher—the hospitalized Himura-sensei—always handed out homework while repeating "Sorry, this is homework, I'm really sorry..." (the class named these attacks "ghost pain"). Consequently, the

class had held high hopes for the substitute teacher. Alas, the new teacher attacked with even more homework than before. Partially due to having betrayed their hopes and dreams, the new teacher's popularity fell rock bottom.

In any case, Haruaki's concentration in the work on his desk was easily interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell.

"Man, to think I was just about to start..."

Kuroe was working at the shop while Fear and Aiko were at the garden. As for Konoha, she had mentioned she was going to her room to make adjustments to her dancing outfit. Unable to picture anyone answering the door first, Haruaki had no choice but to put down his homework and leave the room.

"Coming coming~ Opening up straight away!"

As soon as he reached the entryway, he heard an anxious voice outside.

"H-Hey Kana, do I really have to say it?"

"This is the deal. I'll definitely help you find a good part-time job, so all you need to do is say this one sentence! No matter what, please just say this one sentence! Nishishi!"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous...!"

"Ara, it's Ueno-san?" Konoha had also reached the entryway at this time.
"Kana also seems to be here." Saying that, Haruaki opened the front door—

"...What?"

Haruaki's wide-eyed stares were drawn to what was cradled in Kirika's arms—

A baby.

Dressed casually, Kirika was reluctant to make eye contact with him. It felt like her gaze was wandering along the ground. Blushing intensely to her ears, Kirika said awkwardly:

"...You... You must take responsibility, Yachi."

Arriving unnoticed outside, Fear began to grumble gravely: "Shameless, shameless, completely and utterly shameless...!" Konoha screamed "Eeee~~!" loudly while her hands naturally went for Haruaki's throat; Kirika's head remained bowed, her body shaking nonstop; Aiko simply watched everything in head-tilted puzzlement.



Only Kana was laughing her ass off in delight.

Chapter 2 - Unexpectedly Fragile / "Going on a picnic with the sandwich"

Part 1

According to Kana—

Today, she had gone out shopping with her cousin (recently married) who had brought her six-month-old baby. But just as they started browsing the shops, Kana's cousin had collapsed and was sent to the hospital. Although it was only appendicitis and nothing serious, she took the opportunity to check into the hospital. Hence, Kana was currently entrusted with the baby. Just as she was on her way home, she discovered the baby needed a change of diapers—By chance, she ran into Kirika who was looking for a part-time job in the streets... That was how it happened apparently.

"Then since this is on the road home anyway, Kirika-chan wondered if we should stop by Akki's house or not. Although we could have borrowed a washroom somewhere, it's time to feed the baby anyway~"

"What, so that's what's going on... Well, upon reflecting calmly, it was very clearly a joke! But it did frighten me for a moment there..."

Watching Konoha sighing at the dining table, Kirika hunched her shoulders apologetically:

"I-I'm sorry, Konoha-kun, Kana is the mastermind! Seriously, it's absolutely ridiculous!"

"Ahaha, because I really wanted to see Kirika-chan play the fool's part for once~ Sorry! But it's quite a rare sight, right? And very fun too?"

"Because of this, I was almost strangled to death... Say, is it really okay for the baby to be entrusted to you?"

"Don't worry, I've been helping out at home all along. Come, Yoshifumi-kun, it's diaper time~"

Saying that, Kana skillfully removed the baby's diaper and wiped his bottom. The originally whimpering baby went "Ah~ Ah~" happily with his lower body exposed, perhaps because of the clean and fresh feeling from the soiled diaper's removal.

Konoha and Fear watched the baby with indescribable fascination.

"Wow, so cute!"

"It's true. There's also something cute growing there."

"W-Where exactly are you directing your attention? I don't mean cute in that way!"

"Cute things are cute! Am I right, Haruaki!?"

"W-Why are you asking me?"

Despite Haruaki's misgivings over having an argument over the baby's head, the baby was not only unafraid, but he also smiled happily instead. Clearly this child was going to become a great man one day. While all this was taking place, the change of diaper was completed.

"Okay, next we'll need to warm up some milk. Akki, lend me your kitchen for a bit? Then until that's ready, I'll trust you guys with the baby. Uh~ Kirika, here you go."

"W-Why are you giving him to me... Didn't I already tell you, I'm not used to this sort of thing..."

Handing the baby over to Kirika without taking no for an answer, Kana went into the kitchen with her bag that carried the thermos and other stuff. Although she claimed unfamiliarity, Kirika could not just abandon the baby so she had no choice but to keep cradling the baby in her arms with a troubled expression on her face. But seeing her like that, an eager someone soon volunteered to relieve Kirika of her duties.

"I-If you're not used to it, how about I have a go at taking care of him?"

"Oh thanks, Konoha-kun... Here you go."

Receiving the baby with unexpectedly skillful motions, Konoha smiled happily:

"Wow~ He's quite heavy! But his face and fingers are so tiny, and his skin is so tender and smooth.... Hoho, so cute!"

"Hey, Yachi."

"Yeah, I have a bad feeling about what's going to happen."

Seeing the wobbling mass before his eyes—the baby was fascinated from a food point of view. Hence—

"Iyaah? Umm, wait—Sorry, I don't... have milk, okay...! Ah, stop it, stop it..."

"Smooch~ Smooch~"

"It tickles... Nnnggg... Haa... Jeez... Jeez... Huah!"

The baby bit firmly despite the layers of clothing, causing Konoha's shoulders to tremble. Although she was giggling, Haruaki felt delicately embarrassed to watch. Trying as much to divert his gaze, at this moment—

"Hey Cow Tits, it's no fair for you to be hogging things! I want to hold the baby too, let me hold him!"

"Eh~ Will it really be okay for you? It's no joking matter if you drop him on the floor!"

"Shut up, of course it'll be okay! I didn't drop any dishes just now either, right?"

"Don't compare a baby with dishes, sheesh."

Taking advantage of Konoha's ticklish state, Fear took the baby from her. Because her method of holding was quite a terrifying sight, Kirika then taught her the correct way.

"L-Like this? ...Ohoh, so tiny, so cute~ He reminds me of the dog yesterday."

"Don't compare a baby with a dog, sheesh."

Going "Ah~ Ah~" happily at the sight of the glittering silver hair, the baby suddenly reached out with his short little arms.

Towards Fear's chest.

"Oh? Fufu, a connoisseur knows his stuff after all... Indeed! Fundamentally, there's no difference between me and Cow Tits, there's no need to feel inferior at all! This is proof of that!"

Fear's proud grin of triumph only lasted briefly. After a few pats to confirm the feeling, the baby—

"...?"

He inclined his head with an incredulous expression. Completely losing interest in the chest, he went "Ah... Ah..." as he reached for the silver hair.

"Wha...!" Fear groaned and bowed her head, her entire body shaking for quite a while. Finally, the pressure suddenly vanished and still keeping her head bowed, she—

"Hmm."

With a great sigh, she handed the baby over to Haruaki.

"Sigh... I knew it, a little child wouldn't know things after all... He wouldn't know... It can't be helped. It's not like I'm offended. Ahaha..."

Her dry laughter was extremely stiff. Somehow, she looked a bit pitiful.

Only at this moment did Haruaki suddenly realize that Aiko had not joined in their circle centered around the living room dining table. Instead, she was standing slightly further away. A distance similar to the one she kept during their first encounter.

Indeed, it was exactly the same, completely the same.

Seeing Aiko sneaking glances at the baby from time to time, Fear suggested to her—Why don't you have a go at holding him, how's that?

After much hesitation, Aiko finally approached in trepidation and Haruaki handed the baby lightly over to her arms.

"...Pwah~"

Aiko seemed to be smiling happily as she looked down at the baby in her arms—

Then Haruaki and the girls finally learned.

The true meaning of "earsplitting crying" that actually existed in this world.

Part 2

"I'm really sorry for causing all of you trouble~" Kana departed with Kirika as she comforted the baby. After that, dozens of minutes passed—

Haruaki was alone in the quiet kitchen, preparing lunch. It really was very quiet. Perhaps due to the excessive noise earlier, this feeling was further exacerbated.

"...That girl, she's not leaving her room."

Fear's voice came from behind. Haruaki glanced back to find her leaning her back against the kitchen entrance, her big toes fiddling meaninglessly with each other, her gaze directed firmly to the floor. "I see..." Turning his face forward again, Haruaki replied without pausing in his work.

After what happened, Aiko had left the howling and crying baby and bolted out of the living room. Like the other time, she was exuding an extremely gloomy aura. From then on, she would not respond no matter how they called to her.

"That girl said something about being the same as me or even something worse. She said she was an existence that deserved to be cursed. So... I can understand what she's feeling—"

"What feeling?"

After some silence, Fear infused a little resolve into her words. Quietly, she spoke:

"I have even been used on babies quite a few times."

"..."

"So I felt the same just now. Can I really hold him with these hands of mine? Do I have the right to hold him? Is holding him permitted...? To be honest, my mind was filled with these thoughts. What if he cries? I would feel very unsettled. If that girl is really thinking the same things and in actual fact, she did receive that kind of response, it's no surprise that she would end up so depressed."

"I see."

"What do you mean, 'I see'? Can't you try to comfort her!? That girl... Judging from the way she looks, who knows how long it'll take before she agrees to leave her room—"

Fear's voice carried slight anxiety. Haruaki took a deep breath and slowly turned his head back.

Fear was glaring at him sharply. After careful consideration of what to tell her, Haruaki—

"Today's lunch is: sandwiches."

"...W-What?"

"The weather's nice, so let's eat outdoors. You can also call it a picnic."

He smiled as Fear stood rooted to the spot in surprise.

"No one is ever unhappy about having a picnic. In other words, no one will remain in low spirits after a picnic. And in order to be a picnic, the whole family needs to go."

The color of comprehension gradually appeared in Fear's eyes.

"Uh—In other words, if there happens to be a listless girl, let's force her to go out for a walk to help raise her spirits, so she'd better prepare herself! That's the idea. So... Comrade Fear! Your mission is to tell everyone and gather them all to the entryway, dragging them by the collar if necessary! May victory smile upon you!"

"A-Affirmative! Leave it to me!"

Fear rushed out and the kitchen returned to silence.

Let's not forget to prepare the desserts—Haruaki thought to himself.

Apples, bananas, and of course—an extra helping of rice crackers.

Haruaki set off on a picnic together with Fear, Konoha and Aiko who was forcibly dragged out by Fear. Aiko remained listless but at least it was still many times better than being cooped up in her room.

In light of the sports festival the next day, wasting energy on walking too far would be a bad idea. Hence, the picnic site was chosen somewhere relatively near—the river embankment where they had met Aiko. Just as Haruaki thought yesterday when he was gazing around blankly, the river was quite beautiful and simply eating outdoors was quite fun. It shouldn't be boring, right?

Near the bridge, there was a patch of short grass that looked comfortable to sit on. Laying out a leisure mat, three baskets worth of sandwiches were spread out.

"Ah, this is great!"

"Wow, this looks very tasty!"

"I only used existing ingredients that I had on hand, so I make no guarantees about the taste... There's egg, ham and vegetables or pork chops cutlets... Oh right, there's also some leftovers from Konoha's spicy meat yesterday, so I made a bold attempt of making sandwiches out of them. In addition, there are some deep fried chicken pieces as well as dessert over here. Feel free to take whatever strikes your fancy... Aiko, what would you like to eat?"

Haruaki asked Aiko who was staring blankly. She spoke timidly with her bangs shaking incessantly:

"Uh... Then I'll have the spicy one..."

"Yes! It's the meat Konoha made yesterday! Here you go!"

He handed the sandwich to her. Under everyone's gaze, Aiko took a large bite out of the sandwich she was holding with both hands.

"...Very tasty. The spicy one."

"That's really wonderful."

"Ufufu, to have picked this for her first choice, she must be quite enamored with my cooking! It makes me so happy~"

"You're trying to take the challenge? Be careful of the delayed effects. Even if you may think 'No problem, no problem' to yourself at first, you may find unnecessary blubber growing somewhere imperceptibly... Ohoh, too scary."

"Please don't mind her. That's the biased opinion of someone who won't grow meat anywhere no matter what she eats."

"W-What are you saying!? I'll curse you!"

The meal proceeded with this sort of noisy commotion. Although Alko was not very talkative, she would still answer whenever Fear or Konoha brought up a new topic of conversation. Even casual words with no content were fine, so long as it took things off her mind—Haruaki thought to himself.

There was virtually no one else around. Slightly further away, there was a riverside plaza where people could play baseball, so most people probably went there instead. Hence, it felt as though Haruaki's group had the whole place to themselves on the river embankment. The only sounds were that

of the river's quiet rhythm and the short grass swaying softly. The atmosphere was extremely calm.

Just as Haruaki yawned, overcome with a sense of drowsiness, Fear suddenly frowned in the middle of drinking tea from the thermos.

"Hmm? Hey, Haruaki, the tea's out."

"That's all because you've been gulping it down madly... I wanted to drink some too..."

"Sigh, I guess it's my fault for not preparing enough. I'm thirsty too, so let me buy some juice or tea! I remember there's a vending machine up there..."

"Excuse me... May I go buy the drinks?"

"It's okay, you girls should... Well, just engage in some girl talk to liven up the mood!"

In other words, "you girls should continue helping Aiko lift her spirits." Konoha definitely got the message and responded apologetically: "Thanks, I'll have tea please." Then after asking what Fear and Aiko wanted, Haruaki climbed up the embankment and made his way towards to vending machine, a hundred meters away.

How immensely distant these one hundred meters were going to be—Haruaki had no idea at all.

Part 3

A mere ten seconds or so after Haruaki had left to buy drinks, Fear felt a gaze.

Looking up, she found a figure on the nearby bridge. Elbows resting on the railing, a girl was gazing down at their group with a bored expression. Although her face was well proportioned, her eyes looked a bit violent and part of her hair was uneven in length.

Noticing Fear's gaze, the girl spoke without changing her posture of elbows on the railing:

"Hey, does that taste good?"

Still eating slowly, Aiko inclined her head. Konoha also blinked suspiciously but instantly displayed a perfectly courteous smile and replied:

"Yes, very delicious."

"Oh~ Very delicious huh?"

Regurgitating Konoha's words in a half-hearted manner, the girl nodded.

Then she smiled at Fear and company who were below the bridge—

"However, it seems to smell of extreme incompetence."

Offensive words.

Konoha's smile stiffened:

"Just now—What did you say? I didn't quite catch it."

"I said: it smells incompetent. In other words, totally useless in stuffing your bellies. To put it bluntly... Trash, I'd say?"

"...What right do you have to say something so excessive when you haven't even tasted it? How contemptuous. Even if you beg me, I won't share any with you. Go scram to somewhere else."

Although it was Haruaki's cooking that was being insulted and not herself, for some reason, Fear felt her anger flaring up as she retorted and glared at the girl. However—

"Taste? I know even if I don't try it. A bunch of people bringing their packed lunches, chatting and going 'Wow~ So tasty'—The sight of that is enough to make me conclude: incompetent. I hate this the most."

"Ufufu, what should I do? How exactly should this be handled~?"

While Konoha was smiling stiffly, the skewer sticking in a piece of fried chicken was sliced to pieces by her.

"Hey girl, are you trying to pick a fight? If you don't behave, we have our own ideas too!"

"Yes yes, indeed. You understand, after all... I am picking a fight, so let's get it on! I'm coming over right now!"

"Wha—"

The girl spoke nonchalantly and stretched lazily—Then jumped off the bridge. Her skirt fluttering, she landed on the ground with her legs spread wide. Although the height was roughly two stories high, she landed without any loss of balance.

The girl slowly straightened her knees and stood up. Similar to the uneven length of her hair, her attire was unbalanced as well. Her feet were wearing mismatched boots, but in contrast to the rough image of her footwear, the light and fluttering skirt seemed especially cute. If anything, despite her petite and weak looking figure, the girl had eyes that glinted with violent intentions.

Fear had a premonition. Was this girl so simpleminded as to pick a fight out of ill temper? No—

"—Who are you?"

"Nikaidou Kururi. It's fine even if you don't remember it. After all, it's just an incompetent name."

Saying that, the girl—Kururi—fished out a pendant from her front collar. It was a very heavy looking cross, even bigger than one's palm. As if showing it off, she raised the cross up high, then bit the longer side with her mouth. Holding it between her teeth like a cigarette, she licked it once with her tongue—Meanwhile using her hand to pull the shorter end. The pendant was split into two with a clack, thereby producing a knife in her hand. It was a concealed knife disguised as a pendant.



"What...?"

In the instant of their surprise, Kururi suddenly charged towards them, her posture leaning forward, almost as if licking the ground. So fast! Having readied herself for battle before Fear, Konoha used the outer edge of her wrist to block Kururi's thrust of the knife and executed a palm strike with her other hand within a hairbreadth. However, Kururi simply evaded by a slight bow of her body. Konoha's palm ended up brushing past her abdomen without incident.

"...?"

"Heya!"

Frowning, Konoha kicked, causing Kururi to duck in evasion. The ankle flew over her head. Her uneven hair fluttered lightly. As if getting swept up into the leg's motion, the knife went for Konoha's abdomen with lightning speed—But Konoha lowered her elbow and blocked. Using this impact between bodies, she distanced herself from Kururi.

Konoha's glare became extremely sharp.

"...You don't seem surprised."

"Although the motion only lasted for an instant—But a normal person would probably wonder 'is there something like a metal plate hidden in that elbow?' in surprise, right?"

Kururi shrugged:

"What, so you're actually worried about that? That explains why you only made average attacks."

"Cow Tits, this girl, sure enough..."

"Indeed—she must be an 'interested party' involved with our kind. And she's carrying a knife whose shape is reminiscent of unpleasant memories. Could it be..."

Kururi smiled maliciously and bowed her head in an exaggerated manner.

"Greetings, dear incompetent assholes. I am a member of the Bivorio Family... Although I only joined recently. I am the newcomer whose only forte is being fresh and brand new."

The Bivorio Family. A name Fear could never forget even if she wanted to. She was just starting to feel relieved that they had not resurfaced for some time—But it turns out they haven't given up yet?

"Aiko, you stand back. This girl is very dangerous."

"...Hweh~"

Rushing to shield Aiko who was cowering in confusion, Fear took out her Rubik's cube and stepped forward. Since the enemy belonged to that organization of insane fanatics, there was no reason to show any mercy. Besides, since their opponent was currently under the bridge, there should be no risk of being seen by passersby, right?

"Fear-in-Cube plus the cursed sword Muramasa... Right? Let me carry out my orders and bring you two back, by force if necessary. Pleased to meet you."

"Hmph, to think you can still brag in a two-against-one fight. Hey, Cow Tits, how are you faring?"

"What should I say.... All I know is one thing, that knife turns out to be pretty sharp."

Glancing at the cut in her sleeve causing by her block just now, Konoha murmured:

"Basically, so long as you're careful, hard objects like you or me cannot be penetrated by ordinary blades. But if you're caught off guard and stabbed in an unexpected location, it's a different matter—Vitals, such as the brain or the heart, still correspond to irreplaceably critical components of our true forms, yes? Damage to those parts will be fatal, so please be careful."

"Hmph, who are you talking to? You worry too much."

Their opponent slowly pressed near. Kururi held the T-shaped pendant, or perhaps one should call it a sheath, in her mouth while waving the knife in her hand.

"But this person's movements seem a bit strange? Yes, she's very fast—But her dodging ability is uncanny. For a human, it's on an abnormal level. Even back in the Warring States period, very few master swordsman could dodge the way she keeps evading with the slimmest of margins."

"Even making comparisons to master swordsmen, are you talking about the olden days, old hag?"

"Aren't you several centuries old as well yourself!? In any case, don't go rushing forward mindlessly to create strange openings. Also, if you could neutralize her without bloodshed as much as possible, I would greatly appreciate the help."

"Tell that to the other me—Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi», Curse Calling!"

The Rubik's cube turned into a cube-shaped object. Creaking, grating, it gave off a nostalgic yet contemptible noise. Further transforming the cube into a slashing blade, Fear held it through the controlling chain of cubes. She sneaked a glance behind her.

Aiko is looking at my form. How is it? Have you ever seen a tool whose purpose deserves hatred and curses and as much as me?

Casting these notions aside, Fear held the back of the blade towards the enemy and rushed forward. She was not doing this in consideration for Konoha, but were she to split a human into two with the bladed edge, Fear would probably have trouble sleeping at night even when the victim was an enemy.

The axe was swung upwards. It hit? Dodged by a margin so slim that one might mistaken it for a hit, there was only the sensation of brushing past hair. Always dodging successfully with the minimum motion required, Kururi counterattacked with speed that had all redundant movements eliminated. The knife was even too fast to react against.

"Didn't I already remind you just now!?"

Konoha rushed forward and intervened with a karate chop, crossing blades with Kururi's knife with the sound of metallic impact. Rather than blocking directly, Kururi had parried using by a gentle wrist motion. Otherwise, Konoha's karate chop would probably have sliced through the knife or sent it flying away into the distance.

"Oh my, how dangerous... Come to think of it, Muramasa is that very famous one, right? The Muramasa blade which is quite popular even amongst foreigners. Have you ever met famous figures? Like Nobunaga or Hideyoshi."

"You've been using it so many times—I hate being called by that name!"

While they were having this exchange, Fear swung the axe horizontally. If only it could hit. A solid hit was all it would take to smash them, whether that cheap knife or the girl's slender arm—!

The hit missed. But there was contact. More accurately, the other person touched it.

Parrying Konoha's karate chop while engaged in the intense close-range battle, Kururi jumped up and stood on the axe.

"Wow, I really did it, just like a manga scene... Oh no, who's gonna take a photo for me? Pretty please."

Her joking tone of voice caused Fear to rage in embarrassment. What kind of joke was this!?

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»!"

Kururi lost balance the instant the transformation took place. Taking advantage of Kururi's inability to dodge in midair, Konoha performed a high kick. To be honest, Kururi had no recourse except to defend using her knife—Accompanied by a metallic screech, her body flew into the air. Although she twisted her body and landed nimbly, she now had her back to the river. She was cornered.

"Ahhh damn it, I knew it was a little hard to move in... Lemme make it shorter."

Kururi frowned lightly as she muttered, acting as though she was unaware of her predicament. Applying the knife to her skirt, she shortened it with a series of ripping and tearing sounds. Were Haruaki present, he would probably blush at the dangerous sight.

"So what! Even if you shamelessly expose your legs, you're not gonna seduce anyone here! Maybe if you decorate yourself with wounds, it might actually work better by evoking pity!"

Fear raised her drill and Konoha readied her knife hand as they attacked Kururi simultaneously from two directions.

However, Kururi narrowed her eyes and jumped backwards. Was she going dive into the river to escape? Fool, that would allow me to snipe you

with the wheel or some other attack—Just as Fear was about to transform the drill, she realized what Kururi's intentions were.

What amazing jumping power. Kururi easily traversed a distance of several meters and landed on a supporting pillar of the concrete bridge erected over the river. Was she planning on a triple jump to leap back over here—?

In that case, a trap should be laid. Predicting Kururi's landing spot, Fear thrust the drill forward—

"...Mechanism No.16 dangling type, pyramidal form: «Judas Cradle», Curse Calling."

What appeared was a square-pyramidal block of iron held in midair by a pillar, standing over a square pedestal. There four more pillars, standing at each of the four corners of the pedestal, each longer than the central pillar. A ring-shaped restraining device was connected to the four corner pillars and was suspended over the square pyramid—This was a torture tool for imprisoning a victim and suspending them while their lower body was being hurt by the pyramid below.

"Hoho—I have prepared this for you: humiliation and shame! This is perfect for a girl like you!"

Fear transmitted her will through the chain of cubes, causing the central ring-shaped restraining device to extend with a clang. Although the ring could not be manipulated once it was launched out, catching a flying object and hanging it over the pyramid should not be a problem.

"To think there was such an incompetent hobby...!"

As predicted, Kururi stepped on the bridge pillar and jumped again in a triple jump. Her shortened skirt exposed her thighs while her uneven hair fluttered—

But she jumped upwards instead.

"Wha...!"

Reaching the top of the bridge pillar, or more accurately, the bottom side of the bridge, Kururi contorted herself and kicked the concrete bridge once. The reaction force produced horizontal momentum, allowing her to return to the river embankment as though she were gliding from bottom of the bridge. Naturally, she also flew effortless over and evaded Fear's torture device.

Oh what a shame—that was what Kururi's twisted visage seemed to be saying as she stood there. Fear's gaze met with hers.

"What a monkey-like girl, it's obvious what sort of upbringing this reflects."

"I don't want to hear that from someone like you who laid such a low level trap."

Konoha frowned at this moment.

"What's the problem, Cow Tits?"

"It's too weird. I keep getting this sense of dissonance in her actions... Fighting for one moment, not fighting in the next. Same for just now, she should have been able to attack directly from above in the same manner... Yah—Ah!"

Konoha turned pale instantly. In response, Kururi simply clicked her tongue once.

"Fear! Hurry over to Haruaki! This girl here is most likely a distraction!"

"Wha—"

"Hurry! Given your unrefined manner of combat, you can't handle this person. Just leave the situation here to me!"

"Tsk... Damn it!"

Turning the unused «Judas Cradle» back into the Rubik's cube, Fear swung around.

"Aiko! If you want to be useful, come along with me!"

Fear called out as she brushed past her, rushing up the embankment. Although she did not answer, Aiko also seemed to be hurrying hastily to follow Fear. What can she accomplish? Anyway, let's not worry about that for now.

Fear kept repeating a single name, over and over again, in her mind.

Haruaki, Haruaki, Haruaki.

Please—You must stay safe and unharmed!

After buying tea for Konoha and himself, Haruaki picked orange juice for Aiko who had said she wanted "something sweet."

Then came the issue of Fear's choice. She had stated specifically "I want to try something surprising and completely new—A drink I've never ever tasted before!" After surveying the lineup in the vending machine, Haruaki soon made his choice—the «Super Spicy Habanero Chilli Pepper Style Ginger Ale ~ Mexicana Mama Flavor». Haruaki could not figure out whether the main ingredient was the habanero chilli pepper or the ginger, but Fear was in for a surprise for sure. She'll have to blame no one but her own specific instructions... Almost hearing "I'll curse you!" by his ear, Haruaki smiled wryly as he knelt down and reached towards the dispensing compartment.

Just at this moment, he sensed someone standing behind him. Was the person waiting in line to use the vending machine? I'd better hurry and get out of the way—Just as Haruaki was thinking that...

"Have you ever made a confession?"

Hearing the voice from behind, Haruaki's hand stopped. He remembered this voice. It was only once, but he could never forget the special circumstances under which he heard it.

The man's deep voice shook the air. Haruaki was unable to turn his head around.

"Speaking of confession, you probably don't understand, considering the secular nature of this country? Simply stated, it is... Yes, it is about baring your past acts to the Lord."

It was impossible to discern how far away the voice came from. Several meters? A meter? Or even close enough to be blowing air at his ear? Who knew—Haruaki felt a chill down his spine. His throat felt dry. He must turn around. He must turn around and do something, anything—

"And then you obtain absolution. The past is forgotten, the burden lifted off your shoulders... Indeed, this is the Lord's salvation. Do you understand?"

I understand—Yeah right!

Perhaps he heard Haruaki's internal thoughts. Haruaki could sense the man smiling wryly. Taking advantage of the opportunity to regain control of

his body, Haruaki turned his head around as he fell over. Falling flat on his bottom, he looked up. Indeed, before his eyes was that man.

His muscular physique was clad in a suit, with a soft hat on his head and black leather gloves on his hands. This gentlemanly attire, combined with his wild-looking eyes and beard to give an overall feeling like a member of the mafia, exuding a dangerous aura.

"A-Abyss...?"

"Oh? Good memory, little lamb. Praise the lord—But my official name is Narrow Narrow Abyss."

Abyss adjusted his hat and narrowed one eye. It was still a smile, but Haruaki could feel nothing but fear. The Bivorio Family. An organization affirming cursed tools completely. Narrow Narrow Abyss. Things had settled roughly a week earlier... The threat Haruaki believed to be over was appearing before him once more.

Haruaki desperately racked his brains to think. This man was a cursed tool. More than likely... A cursed cross. What could an ordinary mortal do against him? But Fear and Konoha were...

As Haruaki's gaze wandered, he found a policeman approaching on a bike. This was the vending machine corner in the housing estate by the river embankment. Indeed, it came as no surprise for someone to be passing by. Probably a policeman on patrol. Seeing a suspicious combination of a man standing before a boy who was sitting on the floor, the policeman was naturally intrigued. Hence, he got off his bike.

"What are you two doing?"

"A member of the public security bureau huh... Hmm, I remember this country is famous for not accepting bribes, praise the Lord."

"What are you talking about? Are you a foreigner? Where's your passport?"

At this moment, Abyss suddenly extended his gloved hand. Grabbing the young policeman by the face, he murmured:

"—Confess your actions in the past minute."

"Ah... Ooh...?"

The policeman's eyes lost focus instantly as he spoke in a semi-dreamlike tone of voice:

"Found... a suspicious man and boy... I-Interrogate and examine..."

"I see, how enthusiastic about your work. Your confession has obtained absolution. I shall bear that in mind—"

Once Abyss loosened his grip, the policeman mounted his bike unsteadily and simply rode away.

"W-What... did you just... do...?"

"Nothing much, you'll understand in the next instant. No, more correctly, you will no longer understand in the next instant."

Chuckling, Abyss stepped forward. Overcome with an inexplicable sense of unease, Haruaki tried to get up—But one of Abyss' hands was holding him down by the shoulder. His strength was astounding. Haruaki could not stand up no matter how hard he tried. Then the other hand slowly reached towards Haruaki's forehead—

"S-Stop it!"

"It'll be troubling if you were to misunderstand. This isn't revenge for harming Alice. Instead, this is for your salvation."

What was he... What was he talking about?

Haruaki did not get the answer. The leather glove touched Haruaki's forehead—

"Don't you dare touch Haruaki——!"

Rushing over with a leap, Fear swung «A Hatchet of Lingchi» at Abyss with all her might. Abyss reacted swiftly by turning head and punching nimbly. Wrapped in only a glove, his fist made contact with the blade—Fear felt as though she had struck a rock. Although the hatchet was deflected with a blunt sound, it did send Abyss flying away from Haruaki.

"Hmm... That actually hurts quite a lot. I shall bear that in mind."

"You must be the one called Abyss! What did you do to Haruaki? Answer me!"

Despite the chill running down her spine, Fear roared angrily as a bluff. Haruaki was lying collapsed on the ground. Judging from the heaving of his chest, he was still alive—naturally, dying would be completely unacceptable—But his consciousness had not returned yet.

"Due to your interference, it is only half complete. Hmm, how far did he get with his confession—"

"Speak in terms that I can understand...!"

"Then I shall put things in clearer terms. Fear-in-Cube, do you still refuse to join the Family?"

Seeing that he did not intent to answer obediently, Fear gnashed her teeth:

"My answer remains the same, no matter how many times you ask... In fact, I'm the one who wants to ask you, why do you stay with the lunatics in the Family? Don't you find it shameful to allow those contemptuous curses to continue existing contemptuously?"

"Shameful? I truly find that laughable. we are using those so-called curses to bring salvation to others. Why would there be any need to feel shameful? On the other hand, you are the foolish one for not realizing this."

Fear gripped the hatchet even harder. Using curses to bring salvation? Ludicrous! This notion itself was extremely ludicrous. That blood, those screams, if one really interpreted that as salvation—Now that would truly be sacrilege deserving of curses.

"In that sense, this boy really is a little unfortunate. Even when in possession of me, he cannot receive my blessings. But instead, I used the method of confession to save him."

"So what the heck are you talking about?"

"Granting the forgiveness of memory loss to a sinful past. This is what it means to confess. Under this holy sacrament, no one is exempt from redemption."

"Totally making no sense—Damn it, whatever! I'll just make you explain properly after I beat you up!"

Abyss happily pushed down his hat after listening to Fear.

"Very regrettably, your wish cannot be fulfilled. Since the first plan wasn't carried out completely, I shall retreat for now to confer with her for countermeasures. Kururi's delaying tactics are probably starting to get suspicious—And starting at some point unknown to us, your side seems to have gained an additional Wathe."

His gaze passed over Fear. Fear glanced back to find Aiko standing there after following her. She seemed quite fearful of Abyss' gaze. Aiko pulled up her collar and hunched her neck—but her eyes gazed at Abyss directly.

"Aiko, if you're able to do something, please, don't let that guy escape!"

"Didn't I tell you, that is impossible!?"

Abyss' exasperated voice came faster than Aiko could respond—

For an instant, Fear's view was filled with "something dark."

With neither shape nor form, an instantaneous blackness exuding great pressure.

In only happened for a blink of an eye. By the time she recollected herself, Abyss had disappeared without trace. Frantically surveying the surroundings, Fear found Aiko silently extending her hand. She pointed to a rooftop in the nearby housing estate.

The man in the suit was there in the distance. By some unknown method, he had traveled that far away in an instant. However, Fear immediately dismissed this question from her mind because she spotted another tiny figure beside the man.

Indeed. Long-haired, her monocle flashing, sitting in a wheelchair, smiling as she waved—

Alice Bivorio Basskreigh.

"Damn it...!"

Despite her groans, there was no way for Fear to get there or attack. Very soon, the two figures vanished from the rooftop. As much as Fear was filled with the impulse to chase after them, she knew that their trail would be long gone by the time she climbed up onto that roof.

Rather than that, the more important thing right now was—

"H-Haruaki! Are you okay?"

Fear rushed over to Haruaki's side as he lay collapsed by the vending machine and hugged him, resting his head on her lap. He did not seem to be in pain but only sleeping. As if he were in comfortable slumber, he was snoring with a regular rhythm.

Fear felt relieved. It's okay, I must have arrived in time before that guy was able to do anything...

"Phew..."

As she carelessly sighed in relief, Fear suddenly found Aiko gazing at her. This prompted her to reconsider.

Thank goodness—Indeed. If Haruaki had been kidnapped, then she would not have a chance to try out the drink with the brand new taste that he had bought, right?

Not long after that, after Kururi escaped, Konoha came to converge with Fear and the others. She instantly entered a state of panic as soon as she saw Haruaki's condition, but felt relieved once she learned that he had no external injuries.

Konoha carried Haruaki on her back as the group made their way home. Since the Family had made they appearance, it was necessary to be vigilant. After receiving a report of the situation by phone at the "Dan-no-ura," Kuroe also finished things at her shop, closed up and returned home.

After sleeping in a futon for roughly thirty minutes, Haruaki woke up.

"Ohoh, he awakened!"

"H-Haruaki-kun, are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?"

"Shameless brat, you dare take a midday nap so leisurely, how utterly bold... Hmph."

Haruaki blinked in surprise at the three girls who poked their heads forward to examine him.

"W-What's the matter? You're really hurting somewhere?"

"No, umm... Nothing... It doesn't hurt anywhere, but..."

"I know, it must be a great shock to you to find yourself suddenly surrounded by beauties the second you wake up, right? That must be it. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the world's three greatest beauties are gathered here. There's me, graceful and dignified as Yang Guifei^[1]; Ficchi, who's as lovely as Ono no Komachi^[2], as well as—"

"—Cow Tits, who roars 'ooga ooga' like a mountain gorilla and whose prided skill is eating whatever crap she can find."

"I knew it would turn into something like this in the end! Couldn't you use a human analogy at least? Better yet, stop using adjectives with ridiculous meanings! Good heavens, there's so many things wrong I don't even know where to start!"

"Umm, excuse me, may I interrupt here? I just have a question."

As the room began to get noisy, Haruaki timidly raised his hand, sitting upright with his upper body out of the futon. Startled, the group of girls regained composure and once again bent forward to peer at Haruaki's face.

In a manner that seemed unsure, timid or perhaps troubled—

Haruaki looked at Fear and the girls as if he were meeting them for the first time and said:

"Uh... All of you... Who are you?"

Konoha was instantly floored as though she had suffered a great shock. Fear's jaw dropped to the floor. Completely unprecedented, Kuroe's always sleepy eyes were staring wide-eyed.

Then there was Aiko, watching this scene from a slight distance away—

As if resolving herself to some kind of decision, she clenched her fist slightly.

Chapter 3 - Wondrous Touch / "Who are you?"

Part 1

What is your name? Yachi Haruaki.

Age? Sixteen.

Your father's name? Yachi Honatsu. Bastard Old Pops.

Best dish? Eh? I feel like I can cook anything!

Studying at which school? Taishyuu Private High School.

Who are your best friends? There's Taizou, Kana, etc. Oh, and also Class Rep.

Then what are our names?

"...Who are you?"

"WHY IS THIS HAPPENING—"

Haruaki found himself grabbed by the collar and shaken back and forth. Although I have no idea what is going on I am sorry so please forgive me—Haruaki uttered in confusion. How infuriating.

"H-Haruaki-kun, you... Have you forgotten... Even me?"

"...Sorry."

"You've forgotten the time when I first arrived at this home? Admiring the night sky together for the first time, have you forgotten it? Back when you called me Kono-nee? Only half a year ago, I made you promise not to call me that anymore when we started high school together, is that forgotten too?"

"...Sorry."

"Ahhh—"

Konoha slumped her shoulders dejectedly, so depressed that she even planted her face into the tatami floor. Like a marionette whose control strings were severed, she lay collapsed motionlessly on the floor with her bottom raised in the air.

"Looks like he's neither lying nor playing a joke. But if that's really the case, I'll have to strangle him to death."

"I-I'm not lying! I don't really get it, but it seems like there are strange blanks in my mind... Only those particular parts... I can't really recall them."

"Haru, do you remember this home?"

"This home? Now that you ask, this place is my home. The only things good about it is it's old and spacious. Anything else...? I feel like there should be, uh..."

Kuroe sighed.

"Looks like... Only his memories related to cursed tools have been completely forgotten. The reason is not clear, however."

"Who knows. But one thing I do know is who caused this to him."

Hearing these mutterings, Konoha twitched her shoulder as her face remained on the tatami. But at this moment—

"Eh? Cursed tools... What are those?"

Fear and Kuroe turned to look at each other. Since Kuroe suggested that an explanation of cursed tools might provide the impetus to recover his memories, they went ahead and told him.

Haruaki initially smiled politely and went: "How could something like cursed tools possibly exist~?" Hence, Kuroe extended her hair and tickled his cheek, saying: "Do you still not believe?" Funnily enough—although it actually was not funny—Haruaki stared wide-eyed, full of shock.

"Hey Cow Tits, tell him that you're more than just a woman with a large bust."

"..."

Still lying sprawled on the tatami, Konoha reached for a scrapped pile of old magazines and sliced it apart as though her hand were a paper shredder. "So—" Fear took out the Rubik's cube and transformed it into the drill to show Haruaki who was still sitting in his futon.

"Me, I'm this kind of thing. What, you recall it now? Also, if you're going to admit that you're joking, this is your final chance!"

"Uwah! No, I'm not joking at all! Umm, sorry..."

"Hmm, but upon seeing something like this, a truly ordinary person should be more surprised, agitated or fearful instead. Since you didn't react that way—That means somewhere in the depths of your heart, you still regard cursed tools as basic knowledge perhaps."

"Speaking of which, why do I clearly find it suspicious, but... I'm not really afraid, it's as if I used to know about it in the past."

"You already knew in the first place! Jeez, you shameless brat..."

Then there were some further explanations and the girls also took the opportunity to tell him that this home was a facility for lifting curses from artifacts. "I see... Hmm~ It does feel like something I know... Yet not know..." Haruaki only gave these sorts of ambiguous responses.

"Hmm, I think I get the basic idea... Simply stated, I've currently forgotten things I should already know, right? Why would this happen?"

"An enemy did it."

"Enemy?"

Haruaki seemed surprised by this dangerous word. Fear crossed her arms and continued:

"However, there's nothing for you to worry about. We will help you find a way."

"Yeah, Haru, you only need to act as usual. After all, you still remember the things at school, so there shouldn't be anything inconvenient... At least, I don't think you should be lying down like a patient."

"That's true... Although it's uncomfortable to know I've lost my memory... Apart from that, I'm completely normal. Oh yeah, can I confirm something?"

"What is it?"

Haruaki scratched his head and said:

"Uh... In order to lift your curses, you girls came to this home and are living together with me, right? Since I want things to go back to the way they were as much as possible, I'd like to ask—How did I get along with you all? What were our relationships like?"

Konoha, who had been like a corpse, suddenly revived all at once with astounding vigor. She abruptly got up and said:

"I... For me—You treat me... more gentle than anyone! Or should I say, our hearts and minds are as one? The kind of feeling that as long as you're with me, nothing else matters—To be honest, perhaps we really have quite an extraordinary relationship after all! N-No, not perhaps but surely!"

"Wait a sec, she's lying! You're... You're... that... Yes! You worship me! A willing relationship between the ruler and the ruled. You're the servant in a master-servant relationship—You always prepare a feast of rice crackers for me every single day!"

"Hello darling, I am lover number one, Ningyouhara Kuroe."

"I'm totally confused here!"

Amidst the commotion, Fear thought to herself.

I want things to go back to the way they were. That was what Haruaki said just now. For whom?

The answer was obvious. It was for the girls.

In order to reduce as much as possible their suffering due to the change from before.

Even having lost important memories, Haruaki was not thinking of himself but being considerate for them.

Ahhh, how stupid he remains!

What an excessively nice guy I really feel like cursing.

Leaving behind Haruaki who said he wanted to change, the girls exited the room. Standing in the corridor, the three of them sighed.

Then unlike the mood inside the room, an atmosphere of icy-cold solemnity began to stir.

"How can we cure him?"

"If it's the effect of some sort of power, then logically speaking, defeating the perpetrator should do it, right?"

"Hmph, that man said something about the past and memory loss. It's perfectly clear who the perpetrator is."

"—I shall go out to the streets immediately. In any case, he must be located first."

"Cow Tits, I'm coming too."

"Not necessary. You're still quite unfamiliar with the layout of the streets, aren't you? You should stay here with Kuroe to protect Haruaki-kun. We cannot be sure if the enemy has given up on Haruaki-kun or not."

"Muu..."

"Kono-san, don't overdo it—"

"I won't. I am not so arrogant as to think I can win on my own—But it's possible I might run into a situation where I am forced to fight, such as if I were cornered without any avenue of retreat. Nevertheless, even if that sort of situation should arise—"

Smiling in a bone-chilling manner, Konoha continued:

"Only that man's head, now that is something I shall definitely cut off. Even if it means mutual destruction."

"Hmph, very well. Although I really want to say: 'please do so'—then again, that would mean I won't have a chance to take out my anger on that man, doesn't it? I forbid you to steal a march on me."

The killing intent in the air eased up subtly.

"Like I said, I'm not forcing myself because I want to. In any case, if I run into danger I will consider escaping. Well then, I'm relying on you two here."

Just as Konoha prepared to leave, she suddenly asked:

"By the way, I haven't seen Aiko-san since just now... What happened to her?"

No one present could answer this question.

Abyss could feel Alice's weight as he pushed the wheelchair, strolling through the quiet residential neighborhood. Weighing her wishes against the risk of being discovered by their enemies, his priorities were clear for all to see.

"So it failed..."

"Yes, the process suffered interference halfway through. Even I am not too sure myself, from the feeling in my hand, the extent he actually confessed."

"Oh~ ...I'm sorry, Matriarch and Patriarch, if only I could have delayed those people longer..."

Turning his gaze back at Kururi who was following some distance behind the wheelchair, Abyss curled the corners of his lips in a smile:

"How long you can delay depends on the other side's wit. This cannot be calculated in the first place. Please don't let it weigh on your mind. You did very well."

"Uh... Yes, thanks..."

Scratching her slightly blushing cheeks, Kururi quickened her pace a little to catch up.

"Umm, may I ask a question? What was the purpose of doing all that?"

"Speaking of which, we still have not explained to Kururi-san in detail."

"Right. If we take that boy home after stealing most of his memories, he won't be escaping. Should Fear-in-Cube and the others try to retrieve him, the memories won't return unless they can defeat me. And I do not believe that I will lose to them."

"Naturally. Plus I will help too."

"How reliable of you. Simply stated, if Fear-in-Cube wants the boy to return to the way he was, her only choice is to negotiate with us—'Join the Family in exchange for the boy's recovery.' Once she joins us, everything else is easy. This is the best way to save unnecessary labor."

"I see."

"Since the last plan failed, it can't be helped. We just have to come up with the next plan."

Watching the red leaves of autumn along the path as if mesmerized, Alice commented casually.

"We can't rely on strength?"

"Not that we can't, but it's not certain enough—Don't get the wrong idea, I'm not doubting your strength. I forgot to mention, these people have support from the organization called 'Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation'."

"Oh..."

"If we enter a direct confrontation, they might pour in all their resources to eliminate us. In terms of results, trying to kidnap Fear-in-Cube by brute force could turn into a war against them with considerable probability."

"Our original plan was to have Fear-sama join us willingly. Had it gone as planned, it would have neutralized the Lab Chief's Nation's supportive relationship. But as expected, things did not go that smoothly."

"Somehow it feels so complicated..."

Feeling Kururi sigh in exhaustion, Abyss smiled wryly.

Pondering their next move, he continued to push the wheelchair forward as energetic and noisy children brushed past them. These children were screaming in excitement, laughing very happily.

What a rare sight—Abyss thought to himself. Who could have imagined children who were not screaming in sadness, moaning in pain, trembling in fear, or weeping in despair?

But this was only natural—Abyss instantly corrected his thinking. This was a different country in a different age, currently enjoying an era of peace.

Primitive memories surfaced in his mind. Originally just an ordinary cross—His memories from his time as a symbol for an evil cult that treated children as live sacrifices. He was the accessory installed in a church on the frontier, situated at the bottom of a hellish valley, surrounded by cliffs. There was once a time when the church existed as the lair of devil worshipers who wore the guise of clergy. Believing the devil to be the true God, these people made offerings of children as sacrifices. Violating children before the cross, peeling off their skin, gouging out their eyes, disemboweling their entrails, roasting them alive with fire and eating them.

Those children... Indeed, it all started from those thoughts of despair and now here he was—

As Alice watched the children pass by with a smile, she suddenly turned and looked up, speaking with eyes full of tender love:

"Did you recall the children's screams, Abyss?"

"Nothing escapes you, Alice. Praise the Lord."

Abyss relaxed his gaze and shrugged. This exchange prompted Kururi to speak, somewhat in a fluster:

"You want to hear children scream? Just give the order and I'll go catch a few kids. Your instructions, please."

This new child's offer, full of the Family's love, caused Abyss to smile wryly.

"No, it would be nostalgic and amusing to hear them again, but I won't make such demands—Besides, my curse does not involve that."

"Eh? Then what is it?"

"Oh dear, I haven't mentioned it? My curse, naturally—It fulfills the wishes of humans."

Strictly speaking, that was not it, but in terms of results, they were the same.

Abyss had fulfilled the wishes of innumerable humans. Each and every successive ruler of that church had had his wishes fulfilled. The church had served an uncountable number of purposes. Cult headquarters, narcotics plantation, terrorist hideout, illegal brothel, serial killer playground, as well as a human trading market specializing in girls—

"Hmm~ Human happiness is synonymous with the misfortune of others. Hence, my curse has further strengthened."

"That is for making you more and more of a foundation to transcend the real God. You should not regard those misfortunes as truly unfortunate. Naturally, I don't regard them as such either. The were necessary suffering in order to allow me to encounter you."

Yes—He replied. The final curse allowing him to take human form had come from the beloved woman he was now pushing in the wheelchair.

"Me too... I believe you are the god who has surpassed the real Lord, Patriarch. That's because I would have no place to go if you didn't invite me. Even if I left the juvenile penitentiary, I belong nowhere. You saved me, Patriarch."

Indeed, Abyss had also fulfilled Kururi's wish and saved her. Including what her words did not imply "But in your case, what saved you the most was your trusty Wathe."

"Yeah, I'd have died long ago without it. Dead as a doornail."

"You should continue to lavish your love upon it. Then that child will become even more transcendent, just like Abyss here."

Yes—Kururi nodded. Casting a gentle gaze on her, Alice said: "By the way, the river just now was so beautiful. I'd really like to see it again." For the culprit to return to the crime scene—That would be far too cliched, so the other side probably won't expect it? Thinking that, Abyss smiled and turned the wheelchair towards the river embankment from earlier.

Glancing at the clear water, he thought... They should not spend too much time pondering their next move. If the information from the confession was trustworthy, the Knights' Dominion—the man nicknamed the One-Man Force: «Isolate»—was going to intervene at some point. Action must be taken swiftly.

Did they have to rely on strength after all... But that could end up causing tumultuous changes in the Family's situation. To put it bit more bluntly, their current combat potential was slightly lacking. Not to the point that they would lose, but victory would be no easy walk in the park. If possible, Abyss hoped as much as possible to avoid exposing Alice to danger before she fully recovered.

What should he do... Just as he stroked his beard in thought—

A figure appeared over the embankment, causing Alice to murmur "Ara ara" while Kururi entered a battle stance with a vicious expression. However, Abyss reacted different for he could see from a single glance who the figure was.

Praise the Lord. What he had worried for want of was perhaps offering itself on its own initiative.

Abyss was the tool for human salvation. Naturally, even human-like tools were not exempt from his generosity.

It was the girl who wore a coat with numerous pockets, standing in a manner Abyss could not have imagined from their first encounter. But she instantly pursed her lips as though she had made her decision.

Then she buried her face into her upright collar, but beneath her bangs, her gaze was definitely filled with willpower. The girl said:

"...I have a request for you."

Part 3

To forget everything, how nice that would be.

If only she were no longer herself, how nice that would be—

Her mind was filled with such tumult. The home back there was such a wonderful place.

However—She could not clear her mind. Her past actions, the crimes she had committed, the fearful gaze of the puppy she was holding, the cries of the baby in her arms...

By the time she realized, she had already rushed out of that lovely home. After seeing the way he acted after waking up and the girls' troubled reactions, she discovered something. There was still a way. Knowing that, she could not suppress the motions of her body.

Running, running, running aimlessly.

But her legs began to slow down gradually.

Finally, her steps began to stumble and she switched to walking.

Amidst the unchanging scenery of the streets, her mind gradually cooled down.

—Even though she clearly had no idea where she was.

—Even though she did not even know if the method would work.

—To him and those girls who had treated her so gently, perhaps this would constitute betrayal.

—Stupid, stupid, stupid.

There was a hollow sense of despair as though she had forced herself to wake up from the dream she had always treasured. Continuing to walk with her shoulders slouching in dejection, she suddenly found herself at the river embankment from earlier. This was her third time here. The first time, she had met them. The second time, there were delicious sandwiches. But this time—there was only loneliness.

Sitting down on the embankment, she stared blankly out at the river.

Seconds then minutes passed. Listening inattentively to the sounds of the water, she listened as words of harsh reality surfaced in her mind once more.

—There's no way, it's useless.

—Give up, you're wrong. How could you possibly escape from such suffering? Crimes cannot be forgotten. Immutable things cannot be changed. Go back, go back and apologize to everyone, then—

Leaning her forehead against her drawn-up knees, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was her ritual to forget the path she was heading towards. She spent dozens of minutes breathing in and breathing out. After a cycle of this process finally ended, she had no choice but to open her eyes. She had no choice but to look up.

Then, in order to go back to that home, just as she was slowly getting up—
She heard the sound of a wheelchair.

Perhaps a curse or a blessing in disguise, or simply pure an insignificant coincidence?

Aiko thought to herself. Feeling the existence of the hand of fate stirring in her hollow heart, she wondered.

Ahhh, if the existence known as God truly existed...

Then He must surely be an existence no less deserving than tools like us—

To be cursed. Absolutely.

"...I have a request for you."

Listening to her own voice tremble so intensely, she continued to reveal the contents of her wish.

Very simple yet very difficult. That was the single wish.

"Oh? Why would you ask me?"

The bearded man asked in amusement. "Please explain." The woman in the wheelchair added.

They did not reject her. It's possible, it's definitely possible. Her wish can be fulfilled—

Hence, Aiko—

By her own initiative—

Confessed her sins.

"Mm-hmm, I see."

"Patriarch, are you really going to accept her? She's an enemy, you know!"

"Kururi, we were never attacked by this girl, yes? Besides, offering Wathes equal love is the Family's ideology. Since she has come to us in search of help, there is no reason to refuse... Rather, we should rejoice instead. If we discriminate her just because she spent a little while in the enemy camp, wouldn't that be a great pity?"

"That's... true, I guess..."

"Ara ara, indeed you are right, Abyss. However—"

"I understand. We are also currently in a difficult situation, so your wish cannot be granted for free."

He was eyeing her in an appraising kind of way. Just as Aiko trembled from his gaze, the woman in the wheelchair cocked her head and spoke to Aiko gently:

"There's no need to be nervous. We only ask you to do what is within your ability. First of all, please join our Family—Just as Abyss mentioned, we are currently in need of help. What are you capable of doing? No, before that, may I have your name please?"

"Tateoka... Aiko."

"...What about your true name?"

Aiko gasped, but she could no longer remain silent by this point. Lightly clasping her palms together, she answered—

Her name. The tool created for the purpose of cursing someone—Her name.

"The Indigo Vessel. Also—the Indigo Venom Technique."^[3]

Part 4

On the way back from getting tea from the kitchen, Haruaki heard voices from the living room. Casually, he peered through the doorway to check out the situation inside. Since he intended to return to his room after a quick look, it naturally took on the style of a sneak peek.

In the living room, two people were sitting opposite each other at the dining table. Fear was casually turning the Rubik's cube as she spoke:

"Then... What now, Kuroe? Simply waiting leaves us with too much time doing nothing."

"Hmm yes. Although defeating that man is definitely decided, sitting around is not really working out. We should do our best and try to help Haru recover his memories, right?"

Kuroe nodded as she gazed blankly.

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Well... If we follow the usual methods in manga or movies, the cliched way is to give him a bit of a shock."

"A shock...?"

"Yes, such as—"

Remaining expressionless, Kuroe lifted her fist up to her face and said nonchalantly:

"Punch him."

"...Ohoh, that's easy to understand."

Fear nodded seriously.

(Don't accept that idea so easily!?)

As much as Haruaki wanted to scold them, it would be embarrassing if he popped out now. While praying that the idea would not be put into practice, he continued watching.

"But the current situation is special, so I don't know if punching alone will have an effect."

"So that means a harder punch is needed huh...? If that's what you're saying, let's do it this way—"

Fear also raised something to the side of her face like Kuroe had done earlier.

However, what she raised was a viciously spiked metal club.

(What—!)

Things had gotten even worse.

Haruaki desperately covered his mouth, trying to suppress his exploding urge to protest. Who knew where she had taken that thing out from; was it something similar to the drill he saw earlier?

"...Excellent idea. But somehow, I get the feeling that it's more likely to make Haru's memory loss even worse."

"Umuu, actually, I think so too."

Fear turned the metal club back into a Rubik's cube. Haruaki held his hand to his chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hmm, punching him was just a joke, okay. Anyway... Rather than doing things that may or may not work, why not think about the root cause of Haru's condition instead? In other words, I guess we must wait for Kono-san."

Hearing Kuroe's words, Fear sighed and leaned back onto the tatami floor, raising her Rubik's cube towards the ceiling. Then she began to randomly swivel the colors around.

Relieved that shocking violence was not going to be used to jog his memory, Haruaki prepared to return to his room. At this moment, he heard the last voices from the living room behind him.

"Ahhh, this is so difficult... All I'm capable of is punching him."

"Me too. Don't be disheartened, Ficchi~"

"I'm not disheartened. But it's just... I feel... so vexed."

The voices were mixed with the clicking sound of the Rubik's cube.

They sounded very lonely.

Walking along the corridor, Haruaki suddenly paused for a moment, but instantly continued again.

Walking towards his room—as though he were fleeing.

After a while, voices started up in the living room again.

"...Is he gone?"

"Probably gone."

"How dare he stand there and eavesdrop so sneakily... Couldn't he have come in?"

"He probably found it awkward? That's what I think."

Hmph—Fear snorted and the Rubik's cube began to play its music again.

Click click. Click click. Click click—

The colors did not match up. Because she was just swiveling it randomly, the colors did not match up.

Even so, the scattered colors could not possibly disappear.

Undoubtedly, they remained on this little toy.

Except that they were off from their proper positions.

Quietly, Fear waited for the day they would match up—

I'm the worst. The absolute worst—Haruaki thought to himself.

"Sigh..."

He was sitting at this desk, spinning his mechanical pencil. Staring him in the face was the tea he had brought from the kitchen as well as the math handout he had made zero progress on.

He found it ludicrous. So ludicrous that he was overflowing with self-contempt. It really was the worst.

Dry and boring theorems. Formulae. Geometric analysis. The very fact that he needed do his homework.

These were all unimportant yet he clearly remembered them all.

Why?

Why could he not remember what seemed to be the most important matters—

Apparently it was not his own fault. They said there was a villain. Even so, the one who had lost his memory was himself. He was still the one who could not remember.

As much as he wanted to improve the situation, he had no idea where to start. Because of that, he had followed that unimportant sense of crisis in his heart and faced the desk. Better than staring into space and doing nothing was what he thought originally, but how could anything result? He had intended to drink some tea to relax then work on his homework—visiting the kitchen for a change in mood—but it ended up counterproductive.

Because he accidentally heard their lonely voices.

Once again, he sighed and bowed his head, resting his forehead against the desk.

"Damn it... Hurry up and remember, idiot..."

A sense of helplessness and guilt. The mixture of these two emotions naturally turned into self-directed rage. Hurry up and remember, hurry up and remember, hurry up and remember!

The girls' words surfaced in his mind. If getting punched could really recover his memories, that would be nice too.

Instead of suffering punches, he knocked his forehead against the desk. "Bang! Bang!" Many times, many times.

Ouch. But this would be a cheap price to pay if it really could restore his memories. He kept repeating the act but to no avail.

How could it possibly return his memories?

"Ooh..."

He lifted his sharply aching forehead. Damn it—Cursing the desk again, Haruaki shook his head. Ahhh, no good, this was useless as expected. Calm down.

He deliberately took a deep breath and stretched. Leaning himself back on the chair, he arched his spine backwards and stared at the ceiling—

He found an expressionless young girl, sitting upside down on the ceiling.

"Uwah!"

"Haru, even if you abuse yourself, it won't help."

Maintaining her blank gaze, she spoke nonchalantly. Then with the writhing motion of the hair she had spread out to adhere to the ceiling, she landed with a spin in the air.

"Your forehead is all red now."

"Man, what a shameful scene to be witnessed... D-Don't mind it."

"Was it really because of what we said just now? I'm sorry, it really was just a joke."

"Eh... I was discovered?"

"Yes, that's why Ficchi asked me to check on you."

"I see... No, but this actually has nothing to do with what you said. It's simply... Umm... A ritual for cheering oneself..."

A slight sense of mirth appeared on Kuroe's cheeks. She moved closer to Haruaki.

"I'll heal you. This is the power I possess."

"Eh? No, it's okay, it's not so serious that you need to use your power. It doesn't hurt anymore anyway... Uwah!"

As Kuroe approached, she wrapped her hair around Haruaki's face. Rather than extending her hair, she simply used it at its normal length, wrapping loosely.

But then nothing happened. Nothing particularly special happened.

The petite girl wrapped her arm around the back of his head and simply embraced tightly.

Covered by the hair, Haruaki could not see. His face could sense the touch of a flat chest while the top of his head felt a downward gaze. If one were to describe it instinctively, it was a very gentle gaze.

"W-W-What's going on...?"

"Didn't I say I was going to heal you? But I didn't mean your physical injury. I am a doll and dolls heal people's hearts by embracing and being embraced... But to be honest, that's not really my forte."

Haruaki felt his own hair waving beneath her breath. Next, her voice sounded very gentle.

"Hey, Haru."

"...Yes."

For some reason, being hugged in this manner felt very soothing. Hence, Haruaki did not try to struggle free and simply allowed Kuroe to embrace him as she pleased.

"Don't be impatient. Haru is Haru, the Haru that I know, Ficchi knows and Kono-san knows. This fact will never change."

"But I... don't recognize any of you. I am such a bastard for having forgotten you all..."

"Even so, the fact doesn't change. I am relieved. Seeing you sip tea in leisure or argue noisily with Ficchi, I think to myself... Ahhh, Haru is Haru. So... Don't force yourself. Just act naturally as usual. Don't blame yourself all the time. Don't be harsh on yourself just because you're trying to recover Haru's style, because Haru, you've already got it."

"...Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, you know?"

Kuroe smiled wryly and Haruaki did the same. Finding himself being embraced and comforted by such a child and feeling relieved as a result, Haruaki concluded that he really had far to go. Definitely, he had to pull himself together.

The weight of Kuroe's face against his head was slowly shifting. As the hair slid along her chin, her downward moving face stopped in front of Haruaki's forehead.



Through the layer of hair wrapped around him, came a light touch—The sensation of lips. It felt like a light kiss or a blessing.

A kiss consisting only of pure affection.

Even so, those were still a girl's lips. Despite her child-like figure, those were still a girl's lips. She spoke and gazed gently like an elder sister... A girl's lips.

Ooh—Haruaki stopped breathing and moving for an instant. The hair released him with rustle. Regaining his sight, Haruaki looked forward to Kuroe walking towards the door to leave.

"Hmm~ Well, that's that. Good luck with your homework~"

"Yeah... Yeah!"

Looking back slightly, she waved as she gazed blankly and slid open the paper door to exit. However, Haruaki did not miss the sight. Very faintly on her cheeks appeared a spot of red one would easily miss without close examination. Surely or maybe, this was exceptionally rare.

"...If you feel embarrassed about it, don't do it in the first place, okay..."

Muttering to himself in the room that had returned to silence, Haruaki smiled and faced the desk again. Although he was not in the mood to do homework, there was plenty to think about, more productive things than meaninglessly bashing his forehead against the desk.

He was not going to force things. However, precisely because the girls seriously cared about him—He wanted to recover his memories as quickly as possible. Although he would not force himself to do something he could not, he would desperately do everything and anything within his ability. Only that.

Letting his senses become keen.

Searching for that sense of familiarity.

Upon finding any head-scratching hints, he would focus all of his attention on it.

He will retrieve the fragments of himself that had gone to who knows where.

"Very well."

Having made his decision, Haruaki's mood calmed down. There was no need to be anxious. Simply grasp anything that must not be missed. In any case, the most important thing is to wait for something like that to arrive—

"...In the end, I still have to do my homework, right? Sigh..."

Slumping his shoulders dejectedly, Haruaki picked up his mechanical pencil again.

After that, with the tip of the pencil now feeling slightly lighter than before, Haruaki began to write Xs and numbers.

Part 5

Every pedestrian who met her gaze was taken aback in fright.

Not good, not good—Seeing their reaction, Konoha poked herself in the corners of her mouth to relax her expression. That said, she was not sure if her face really became less tense, but to be honest, she did not really care.

She looked up at the clock that was built in front of the train station. It was already dusk. As if reflecting her mood from the fruitless search, the sky was dark and gloomy. This was not only partially due to the setting sun, but also because of the dark clouds filling the sky overhead. It made the sunshine from noon earlier seem like a dream. Will the sports festival tomorrow be okay?

Konoha had hoped for the sports festival to arrive without incident.

During the picnic, Haruaki-kun was clearly still his usual self.

Biting her lower lip, Konoha made a turn and stepped into the commercial district again. How many times has she done this already? Forgotten.

As this sentence occupied her mind and shook her heart, she bared her fangs.

(Forgotten.)

Forgotten. Haruaki-kun has forgotten.

(Forgotten.)

Forgotten about the past, forgotten all those accumulated memories, forgotten all the times spent together.

(Forgotten—!)

For Konoha, those were very important things. What about for him? She wanted to believe it was important, she wanted to believe. Oh no, but he has forgotten. He does not remember. Even that time, or that moment, or that particular time, that occasion, that event—All forgotten!

Why? Who is the culprit? The one who caused this to him.

—Isn't the answer obvious? It was that man. That man!

Halting in her footsteps, she stroked the rim of her glasses. She did not need to look to know how other people were reacting. Given her current gaze, it would not be strange even if someone called the police.

While telling herself to be calm, she first went into a back alley between shops. This was the dark side of the world where the road was so narrow that even riding a bike would pose a challenge. The colorful bar signs also made the road even more difficult to pass through. Weeds growing through cracks in the concrete were as feeble as quarantined and terminally ill patients. The drifting smells of alcohol and yakitori grilled chicken evoked an atmosphere of traditional Japanese ballads. If a female high school student were walking through this kind of place in the middle of the night, it would be virtually the same as asking to be accosted by ruffians. But currently it was only dusk. If any unfortunate soul tried to annoy this apparently lovely high school student with her excellent figure—Thank you very much, I'll gladly pummel you to relieve my stress.

Just as Konoha adjusted her breathing, she heard a strange and unpleasant noise—Someone was vomiting loudly. An impatient drunk? Konoha cast her glance to the sound and her mood instantly brightened. Despite seeing vomit and smelling it, she felt wonderful.

It was Kururi.

By the time she noticed, Konoha's body had already acted.

Startled, Kururi looked up, drawing out the knife as she held the cross pendant in her mouth—Too late. Her movements were so unrefined that the speed she had displayed earlier during noon seemed unreal. Konoha effortlessly caught both her arms and successfully pinned her against the wall like a rapist.

"Ooh..."

"How fortunate, then let me pick up the pace and cut to the main query—That man... Abyss, where is he?"

"A-As if anyone would tell you, incompetent fool..."

"The incompetent one is you, to be caught so easily."

This retort must have struck a nerve, for Kururi's face distorted slightly. Serves you right—Thinking that, Konoha brought her face close and gazed into her eyes at close range, almost enough to make contact with her glasses.

How troubling, this dark impulse surging from the depths of my heart that cannot be suppressed.

"Yes, I am very troubled. To be honest, the one I seek is not you but Abyss."

"Then you've got the wrong person. Go find him yourself."

How amusing. Brushing her own nose past Kururi's nose, Konoha drew even closer to her face. As if breathing against her ear, Konoha spoke directly to Kururi's ear:

"Ara, in that case, in other words—"

Whisper. Whisper.

Gently, very gently, she whispered.

While licking that soft ear.

"Little lass—Is this what you mean? If you are merely a useless prisoner, then even if I were to take out my anger on you, no one will be complaining, yes?"

"Wha..."

"Ara ara, how unfortunate~ I originally planned to satisfy myself just by killing that man—But as luck would have it, I ran into you. It's perfectly fine if you embarrass yourself with incontinence, perfectly fine! Indeed, it's perfectly fine. However, please remember to squeal like a pig at least, so that I am satisfied, yes?"

Slowly, very slowly, she looked up and once again savored the sight of the pitiful girl and her pitiful gaze.

Then with a chuckle:

"—You're acting too scared!"

Konoha headbutted her in the forehead with all her strength. Kururi dropped her knife and collapsed to the ground. Did she receive a concussion?

"Oh dear! Did I just use a manner of attack unbecoming of a maiden? No good, no good."

Chastising herself for several seconds, Konoha dragged Kururi's body and loaded the girl onto her back. Then making an expression as though "taking care of a drunken friend is such a pain~", Konoha made her way home.

Even so—She thought to herself. Even so, why was this girl in that kind of place, engaged in an act that only useless salarymen would do after work...?

Part 6

A cursed pot. A vessel for gu poison. The Indigo Venom Technique.

The girl had described herself in these ways. In order to witness her power, the group had made their way to the warehouse by the sea. "Luckily, I still remember this location." The Matriarch murmured, but Kururi did not quite understand.

"Preparations are apparently in order." Saying that, the Patriarch left for somewhere. In less than two hours, he brought back things that did not quite match him.

Dogs. A Norwich Terrier, an American Cocker Spaniel and a Schipperke.

"I only found these despite my haste. Not a bad catch, I suppose?"

"Uh... What will they be used for?"

The following was heard from the girl who used the situation to introduce the explanation:

So-called gu poison involved sealing several animals or bugs into a vessel and having them cannibalize one another—Then the sole survivor, which became something like a familiar, could be used as a catalyst for curses.

An ancient spell technique. Like hammering nails into straw effigies, it was a method for cursing people.

Whether such methods could actually curse people, there was no consensus. But back in times before the maturation of science and medicine, there was no way for a person to refute claims even if one were to tell them that the cause of their illness or suffering was "the curse I placed on you." If the caster believed it, the cursed victim believed it, and all the surrounding people believed it, then a curse became truth.

Consequently, a true "curse" would arise from everyone involved in the curse that was impossible to prove—those who suffered, those who died, those who were left behind—thereby causing the vessel to become truly cursed. By devouring creatures, making it their home, gu poison could indeed be prepared from the vessel for harming people.

"Human imagination truly astounds me. For a real curse to be born from a nonexistent curse. In any case, she said that she can still employ that original method to produce gu poison if she were to revert to her original form as a pot. However, due to the curse, she can apparently create the venom even in human form as well, and in greater amounts with more materiality in her powers, to create existences that are literally familiars."

"How is it done?"

The Patriarch's answer was simple and easily understood.

—Having her kill living creatures under particular circumstances.

"All the creatures killed by her are apparently transformed into gu poison under her control. Currently, she seems to be able to maintain several of them, but for our purposes, the more the better. As a demonstration, we are asking her to go through the process of creating more venom."

Hence, Kururi understood how the dogs in his arms were going to be used.

—A sharp pain.

Something was hurting, in the very depths of Kururi's heart, the pit of hell in her subconscious that she could not find even if she wanted to.

Unable to confirm that feeling, Kururi's awareness was brought back to reality by the Patriarch's next words.

"Very well, let us begin. Would you like to watch as well?"

"...Yes."

A sharp pain—Something else was stinging again, but Kururi deliberately drove the thought away.

Whatever, anything was fine. As long as she could be together with him, behind him. Whether meters or centimeters, as long as she could stay somewhere close to him.

Entering the sealed warehouse together with him, she entered the warehouse that was akin to a sealed vessel.

Then.

Then—

Puchz

"! ...H-Huff..."

By the time Kururi regained her senses, she was outside the warehouse. The stench of blood lingered in the depths of her nostrils. Her body felt as stiff as frozen ice. She felt compelled to vomit. Why? A sharp pain. Stinging pain. Nikaidou Yutaka. Who was that? Although she had an older sister, she had no brothers. And the older sister had jumped off a cliff, together with their father and mother. Was it her uncle's name? Maybe. As much as she did not want to remember, somehow the name barged itself into her mind.

"Even though you have murdered before, you cannot bear the death of animals?"

"Ah... No, this..."

"It does happen, you know? Perhaps precisely because they are fragile creatures, they evoke pity in others."

Seeing the Patriarch standing behind her, smiling wryly, Kururi felt ashamed and embarrassed. Forcing her vomit and saliva back into her stomach, she straightened her back.

"I'm fine. Sorry about that."

"Very well. In any case, the entire process truly compels me to praise the Lord."

"In other words, the girl's ability is accepted?"

"In terms of combat potential, truly top class. Now my calculations can proceed."

"So, next is handling Fear-in-Cube...?"

He shook his head:

"Didn't I tell you already? Relying on strength is not a simple matter. What I mean by 'calculations' is what happens afterwards. The conclusion is—Alice has made her decision to start a war with the Lab Chief's Nation."

War. A term that was furthest removed from Japan.

"Hence, we must first establish a solid foundation. Scattered across the world, the various Family members will be ordered to act—And our plan for tomorrow... This is it."

He took out a piece of paper from his suit pocket. Kururi casually received it. Printed on this worthless-looking paper, there was some text and a map.

"Sports festival...?"

"We picked it up just now. Alice was very interested and it apparently coincides with 'conditions' demanded by Aiko. In preparation for the coming moment, we decided to stock up in venom here, all at once. Haha, Alice's sudden whims always astound me."

What on earth—could that mean—?

Just as Kururi stared blankly at the contents of the flyer, he placed his hand on her shoulder. A warm hand. This simple act was enough to make her whole body gradually feel hot and she became unable to think.

"Kururi, in the near future, the Family's situation will probably undergo dramatic upheaval. I will not change and neither will Alice—But very likely, there will be changes in the members of the Family. Amidst all this, I hope you will become the one who shoulders the responsibility for the next generation of Family members. I have great expectations for you."

"Yes... Yes!"

Such elating words. With just this sentence, nothing else mattered—Kururi thought to herself again. However—

She saw the figure of Tateoka Aiko in the warehouse at this moment.

Aiko's face was extremely blank. She stood there, her entire body listless.

And her hands were smeared with fresh blood.

"...I did it. Did it. No choice but to do it. Because otherwise, they won't help me. Hence, hence, hence, hence, hence, hence, hence..."

She kept trembling and feebly spoke in monotone like a broken musical instrument. She must really be broken. Broken by her own wish.

"Ohoh. In any case, you should take a break until tomorrow."

Hearing his words, Aiko slowly looked up from her incessant and blank murmuring.

"Tomorrow... I have to... do it too?"

"I'll be greatly troubled otherwise. It's nothing much, everything will end in an instant."

"Once... Everything... ends, will you really... really..."

Displaying an extremely gentle smile, he approached Aiko. His hand left Kururi's shoulder.

"Yes, once everything ends, I will fulfill your wish. Undoubtedly, I will fulfill your wish."

"..."

Then he—

Caressed her head with tender affection, as though she were his own child.

He was stroking the head of the girl whose trembling blood-smeared hands had just extinguished several lives.

—A sharp pain.

The vomiting impulse had returned. It even felt several times stronger. So disgusting so disgusting so disgusting—

Kururi broke into a run. Her singleminded wish was not to let him witness her embarrassing moment.

With no idea what path she had taken, she ran into a back alley where there were few people. Finally, she reached her limit and could run no longer.

Vomit. While experiencing a stinging pain somewhere, she vomited. Blood. Yutaka. An unrecognized name.

Just at this moment, she felt someone's presence. Startled, she looked up to see—

Before her eyes was a glasses-wearing embodiment of murderous intent, silently approaching.

Part 7

Inside a room in the Yachi residence—a normally unused room, everyone was gathered. The sun had already set. A long-unused fluorescent tube illuminated the empty confines of the tatami-floored room in a subdued manner.

"You have to do this here, then... Like this, like this... Like this!"

"Uuumu... Kuroe, where did learn this type of skill? I've seen people who do this for a living, but your rope tying skills are in no way inferior to theirs."

Kuroe was tying the captured girl to the pillar in a complicated manner. As Fear spoke to her, Kuroe did not stop swinging the electrical cord she was using as a rope.

"This is supposed to be part of a maiden's upbringing. Since ancient times, in order to become virtuous wives and good mothers, young maidens must learn five essential skills before they get married. Namely, cooking, laundry, cleaning, tailoring, as well as—ropes!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about with the last item!"

"Excuse me... I think this is the crime known as kidnapping or illegal confinement, right?"

Haruaki watched the scene as he sighed with his palm against his brow.

"Don't mind that. This girl doesn't live in that kind of world."

"Uh, well... This is for retrieving your memory, Haruaki-kun, I actually have no wish of doing this. If you could please just turn a blind eye, it'll be a great help..."

Cow Tits spoke as she rubbed two fingers against each other awkwardly. How dare she try to act cute.

"What do you mean, 'I actually have no wish of doing this'? When you brought this girl home, didn't you look like a hunter who had captured a great mountain boar? I was really afraid you were going to salivate and take a bite. That made me so worried."

"What kind of wild child of nature do you take me for!?"

While they conversed, Kururi lightly moaned "ooh..." and woke up.

Instantly, she noticed her surroundings and tried to make a move—But because she was tied to the pillar, she obviously could not do anything. The electrical cord had her tied to the pillar with her hands behind her and immobilized her entire body through a complicated series of knots. Although her legs could be considered free, she should not be able to stand up. After twisting, struggling, and kicking her legs out for a while, Kururi finally stopped and only glared viciously towards the group.

"Settled down now?"

"Fucking incompetent assholes..."

"It's great that you're so energetic. Thank you very much for accepting the violent Cow Tits' invitation. Please fully enjoy your stay."

"What violent... No, hmm, denying it isn't really appropriate for the current mood. I-In any case... Cough! I will be safekeeping this for now, so don't even think of escaping."

Konoha cleared her throat and raised the cross-shaped pendant—Kururi's concealed knife—up high and waved it. Kururi clicked her tongue in chagrin.

"—Very well, all I want to ask about is one thing. Where is Abyss?"

"Do you really think I'll answer?"

"Do you really think you have a choice?"

Fear gulped and steeled her resolve. Taking her Rubik's cube out of her pocket, she transformed it into the giant hatchet. Pressing the blade against Kururi's face, she twisted her lips and said:

"Haha—This is me. These circumstances are very much in my style. Okay, time for me to do my job, right?"

"...!"

"I'm going to use this to pare off flesh from your body, one slice at a time. I'll start with the tips of your toes, then your fingertips, shortening them one after another, centimeter by centimeter. I guess it'll start getting tiresome roughly when I reach your elbows? Then I'll shave off your ears through a few dozen cuts. Because ears are small, it'll be over in an instant? Once I'm tired of playing the paring game, I'll put you on the rack and simply stretch you taller. Ahhh yes, it'd be nice to use yesterday's «Judas Cradle» that I didn't get to abuse you with. That one's amazing! Have you seen a person die from having their crotch torn open? You haven't, right? Rejoice, for you can personally—"

"No."

Fear was slightly surprised by the hand on her shoulder. Haruaki's.

Despite the fear and anxiety filling his gaze, there was a certain brightness in the depths of his eyes that Fear found extremely nostalgic.

He shook his head and spoke as though he were searching for the right words:

"No... How should I put this? I don't quite understand, but that kind of thing is absolutely not allowed... I get the feeling that I can't let you act like that, so stop it. Although I don't understand the details, perhaps this is just for my sake, anyway, please stop."

Ahhh—Fear's heart could feel the obvious truth. This guy was Haruaki after all. Even having forgotten that she was a cube, having forgotten that cubic true form—He was Haruaki without a doubt.

"...Psyched! I was just kidding."

Turning her gaze away, she transformed the axe back into the Rubik's cube. Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, Fear was merely making threats without intent to carry them out, honestly—at least for now.

Seeing the situation, Kururi arrogantly sneered, perhaps serious or merely bluffing:

"Huh... What, you're not going through with it? How boring."

"This is getting troublesome. We must find Abyss no matter what. How should we get it out of her?"

Indeed that was true—Fear frowned. No one present had the power of mind reading. How could they get her to cough it up—Oh no, if after all this contemplation, ultimately she still had to resort to exhibiting her powers to coax out the answer to that man's location, to retrieve Haruaki's memories—How should she make her final decision—

"...Since she won't tell us, then I guess it's fine even if we don't interrogate her?"

At that moment, Konoha's quiet words took everyone by surprise, including Kururi.

"Cow Tits, what's with you!? Are you saying it's okay for Haruaki to stay like this!?"

"That is not what I said. What I mean is this: we don't have to ask to find out, right? When I was searching this person, I discovered something interesting."

With a rustle, Konoha uncrumpled a piece of paper. Fear was able to recognize it. Having not lost any memories about anything unrelated to cursed tools, Haruaki was also able to recognize it.

"The sports festival's flyer...? What about it?"

"Why would this person carry something like that? Never mind, I'll ask directly."

Konoha instantly slammed the piece of paper onto the table and approached Kururi as though she were about to bite and sever her neck. Looking like she was recalling some sort of unpleasant memory, Kururi's eyes wavered for an instant—

"Tomorrow, Abyss and Alice will attend the sports festival, yes?"

Kururi did not answer but simply bit her lip and averted eye contact. But for Konoha, this was already enough. Slowly, Konoha drew away and said:

"...Looks like there's no mistake. They will be there."

"W-Why would... you know...?"

"Ha, I became even more certain after seeing your reaction. I truly thank you very much. The ingredients consist of the existence of this flyer, the possibility that those people have not given up on kidnapping Fear-san, plus intuition. The method of cooking is simple questioning, intimidation and insight—That's all. The correct answer is thus ready to serve."

Fitting methods for the scheming and underhanded Cow Tits—Thinking that, Fear looked down at Kururi.

"What's their goal?"

"..."

"You really aren't going to tell even a little? But just getting the opportunity to meet that man is already massive progress for us."

"What will you do?"

"Ambush and attack—Simple as that? Although there are indeed risks, we have no other choice."

Indeed. Compared to anything else, planning how to defeat Abyss was the first priority.

"It'd be dangerous if Abyss made another move on Haruaki. Should we leave him at home?"

"I think that would be even more risky, since all would be lost if someone attacks our home behind our back... Since we're not sure what he'll be doing, I think it's best that we all stay together."

"Fair enough... In order to engage him in combat without causing trouble to the students, perhaps we'll need assistance from the superintendent's office. Let me give them a call later. Haruaki-kun, is this okay?"

Asked by Konoha—

"I don't quite get it... But since we're all going to the sports festival, that's good too, right? I don't really want to call in absent either, and besides..."

"Besides?"

Haruaki cocked his head, surveyed everyone's face in sequence, then said with uncertainty:

"Well, I get have this feeling... Like someone seems to be super looking forward to the sports festival? Sorry but I can't remember who it was. It seems like someone was working very hard in desperation to do something, and then... Am I over thinking things?"

These words made Fear quite happy.

Nevertheless, they also made her very lonely at the same time.

"R-Regardless of excessive worrying or not... Looks like we've decided to all attend the sports festival?"

"Also, may I ask one more thing? What are we going to do with this person? Tomorrow."

Haruaki's finger was pointed to Kururi, obviously. Ahhh—everyone looked at one another.

"It's not like we can let her go free, right? At least not until Haruaki recovers his memory."

"I agree too. Uh... Ah, how about Kuroe stay behind to keep watch over her?"

"Eh, didn't we just decide that, no matter what happens, it's better for us to stay in the same place? Also, I want to pay them back for last time... Besides, I'm still tasked with the all important mission of cheering for Ficchi, to visually lick Ficchi's nubile young body that will be clad in gym clothes, all dripping with sweat from her exertion."

"Stop using such weird descriptions!"

"In any case, the other side should not be aware that we have kidnapped this girl. My wonderful technique of «Bondage Skill No.7: The Great Turtle-Shelled King Dies a Second Death» absolutely cannot be released by one person's power alone. So, it should be fine to leave her here. After all, she's not going to die even if neglected for one day... Oh right, this reminds me, some preparations are in order. Haru, come help me."

"O-Oh okay."

Having apparently thought of something, Kuroe left the room with Haruaki. Left behind, Fear and Konoha exchanged glances, intrigued. At this moment, Fear recalled something that she should ask Kururi.

"Hey, do you know a girl who wears a coat with pockets all over? I don't suppose the Family has done anything to her?"

"Oh—Aiko-san hasn't come home yet?"

As soon as Konoha spoke, Kururi's shoulders began to shake. She was laughing.

"...Hahaha, come home? How incompetent. She couldn't possibly come home."

"You know something? Answer me!"

Kururi's face was filled with overt derision as though she had finally snatched an opportunity to strike back.

"Since it doesn't matter, let me tell you this—That girl has joined the Family. She came to find us on her own initiative and is currently together with the Patriarch."

"Y-You, stop trying to trick us!"

"If I wanted to trick you, I'd make up a more plausible lie. She really is very cooperative and she's currently enthusiastically making preparations to kill you all."

Delighted by their surprised expressions, Kururi continued to talk about Aiko—Her true form, a cursed vessel for gu poison meant for cursing others, as well as the process for creating gu poison.

"What did... you say...?"

"Why would she assist the Family? Also, what is the necessary condition for creating gu poison?"

"Oh my, I've said too much. If you wanna know, untie this."

Untie this? Yeah right. Releasing the captive in exchange for that information was not a worthwhile transaction. Kururi clicked her tongue as though she had realized they were not going to loosen her bonds.

"...Hey Cow Tits, I'm not too sure, but I have an ominous premonition."

"What a coincidence, me too. Many things are easily imagined... But Aiko-san..."

Fear recalled. Aiko's timid motions, the way she pulled up her collar to hide herself, going "Hweh~" as if very troubled, going "Pwah~" when happy, praising Fear's dancing, saying she wanted to watch the sports festival, eating sandwiches together. Although it was only for a day, she was most assuredly—family.

Be that as it may—Fear gritted her teeth. Indeed, be that as it may—be that as it may—

"...If she shows up as an enemy, I'll have no choice but to fight."

"Hmm."

Konoha declared softly without hesitation. Fear glanced at her profile nonchalantly. What did Cow Tits actually think? How deep did her resolve run? And herself, how far was she willing to go—

At this moment, the footfall of Kuroe and Haruaki's return was heard. Fear looked back at the sound of the sliding door being pushed open. Haruaki was standing there with Kuroe, holding a tray. The tray carried steaming—

"...Rice balls?"

"Yeah. These beautiful triangles were kneaded by Haru's hands using fresh, hot, white rice together with seaweed seasoning carrying a wonderful ocean flavor. Then, taking these appetizing things..."

Kuroe took a rice ball from the tray. Holding it before Kururi's eyes, she then plopped herself down and took a seat on the floor.

"Munch munch munch much."

"...What the fuck are you trying to pull? Shitty little brat."

Nonchalantly accepting Kururi's gaze, Kuroe deliberately chewed the rice ball even slower. Having bitten off almost half of the triangular rice ball, she brought it in front of Kururi's face as if showing her intentionally:

"Wow~ It's super tasty. The salt is seasoned perfectly. Simply looking at it is enough to make people drool."

"...Hey Kuroe, what are you doing?"

Expressionless as usual, Kuroe turned her blank gaze towards Fear:

"Hohoho, I've always wanted to try this, a situation where I can savor my absolute superiority in front of a captive... I just can't get enough of this!"

How malicious. That said, it was not as though Fear could not understand how she felt.

"That kind of incompetent crap, I won't eat it even if you begged me! Go and die!"

Her face all red, Kururi began to struggle violently. "Hmm... Kidnapping, imprisonment and abuse now...?" Haruaki sighed and pressed his palm to his forehead. Konoha also sighed, but finally—

"Kuroe-san!"

"What is it, Kono-san?"

Konoha glared sharply for an instant. Then she said:

"...If you threw the rice ball that was about to enter your mouth onto the ground and say: 'Eat it from the floor like a dog!'... Wouldn't that be better?"

"Oh~ There's that method too."

"What the heck are you going 'oh' for!? At least let her eat normally, okay!"

"Just kidding, okay?"

"Yeah yeah, just kidding. How could we possibly mistreat Haru's rice balls? That'd be way too wasteful. It was just a joke just now anyway. These were originally prepared for her to eat normally... So that's the actual plan. Come, say ah."

"I'm going to fucking murder you! Like I said, I'm not eating that crap! If you really want me to eat it, then loosen my bonds first!"

"That's no fun at all... Correction, too dangerous. Rejected. So, say ah."

"You just went and said it's no fun at all!? What fucking joke is that!?"

Could it be... Kuroe's anger towards the Family was building up as well? Like the way everyone else was angrily shouting at this girl, perhaps Kuroe was expressing her wrath by vexing the enemy in this manner. Fear wondered to herself.

Of course, it was also highly probable that Kuroe was simply enjoying herself as usual.

Part 8

Two rooms had been booked at the hotel. Aiko was taken to one of them.

"You can sleep here."

It was a rather spacious and luxurious room. Aiko casually swiveled her neck to survey the room's interior. Suddenly, she found a small set of luggage in a corner.

"Oh, this was originally the room meant for Kururi. Since she's always jumping around so nimbly, I asked Alice to keep the key for her to avoid losing it. How fortunate."

These words prompted Aiko to recall. She turned her neck slightly.

"Umm... Are we really not going to look for her...?"

"We would have if there were time. But now, we must rest in preparation for tomorrow... Since we're not certain if anything happened to her, she might suddenly return on her own. Even if she encountered an enemy, as long as she's not dead, she should be able to find a way on her own. Even if caught and cornered, she won't bear us any resentment, because we are family."

"Because... family..."

So... It was really okay? Aiko stared blankly as this question consumed her mind. Not just the matter of not searching for Kururi, but also what she had done to another human.

"No resentment... huh... If she takes ownership of me, that person... will be cursed..."

"You mean Alice? That goes without saying. She has also offered her love to you equally."

Saying that, Abyss leaned against the wall and touched the tip of his hat.

"Let me take this opportunity to ask you: do you hate humans?"

"...I don't know."

"Then, how do you feel about humans?"

"...I don't know."

"Hmm... You don't know how you should feel... Is that what it's like? Then I shall tell you."

Feeling greatly interested, Aiko turned herself around completely and faced Abyss who was towards the entrance.

"Just pity them."

"...Eh?"

"Humans are weak and powerless. They are truly pitiful existences. Hence, as transcoders, we must show them tender affection. By our doing so, humans will gladly accept this love and believe that all they need to do is offer the same love to us in return—It's truly sad that Alice and the members of the Bivorio Family are the only ones who have realized that this is the one true path."

Aiko did not quite understand, but thought this might be a good opportunity to ask:

"You and that person... What kind of relationship do you have...?"

"My curse is fulfilling human wishes. She suffered due to the wish of one of my former owners and her thoughts caused me to become even more transcendent. After that... Although it sounds silly, I happened to crush my former owner to death during the instant when I became mobile and turned my body. Indeed, by 'becoming mobile,' I am referring to the time when I first became qualified to take human form. In that sense, I should be younger than you, right? It does feel a little strange to be teaching you things as though I were your senior. Does it bother you?"

Age was meaningless to their kind. Aiko shook her head. Abyss smiled:

"Then truly, praise the Lord. In any case, at that time, she realized that I was like God, even fairer than God, a transcender who lives only to grant human wishes. Hence, rather than hating me, she has loved me deeply ever since. Having received familial love, shouldn't I respond with familial love in turn? Hence, I also loved her since. Although she was very cute as a child, she has now grown up to become as beautiful as the Holy Virgin—Oh dear, I've fallen into boasting of my love affair and gone on a tangent."

Stroking his beard, he continued:

"In other words, it's a very simple matter if anything. I am loved by humans. Pitiful and weak humans offer the entirety of their being to love me, most admirably. Hence, I pity and love her tenderly. For the sake of her wishes, I will use force at all costs. That's all."

"..."

"She loves you too, so I hope you can offer your power to her in the same way. That will make her happy. And if she's happy, I'm happy too. Then—"

"...That means if I make her happy, I'm loving you indirectly, like family. So you will reward me with love—in other words—you'll fulfill my wish..."

"Indeed. Now you understand our relationship?"

"Yeah..."

Abyss nodded with satisfaction. Aiko nodded back in turn. Understood. She understood.

For this, for fulfilling her wish. That was why she was here.

And had betrayed them "Well, you should get some rest today. Sweet dreams."

Waving his hand ostentatiously, Abyss left the room. Aiko stood in the room alone, staring blankly, ruminating over his words. Sweet dreams.

—I've decided not to sleep tonight. She thought to herself.

Once tomorrow arrived, everything in her dreams and more would be materialized.

How could she possibly not have nightmares?

Part 9

Unable to sleep, her empty stomach complaining, Fear quietly got out of bed and went to the kitchen. Along the way, she sneaked a peek into the room where Kururi was tied up, but only found rhythmic snoring. To be able to sleep in that kind of posture, clearly she must be quite a happy-go-lucky person.

Then Fear walked into the kitchen.

She discovered a figure standing there, holding a sharp and bladed instrument.

"Wha... It's H-Haruaki? Don't scare me."

"Hmm? Oh yeah, sorry, of course this would frighten you. Only natural."

Yeah, on further thought, this really was quite strange—Thinking that to himself, Haruaki returned the kitchen knife to the rack on the counter. The girl's silver hair was glistening dreamily beneath the moonlight streaming in from the small window. Ahhh—It felt like he had seen this before—Yet it seemed unfamiliar at the same time—This mysterious silver color in the darkness. So confusing and ambiguous, even Haruaki was feeling anxious too.

The girl's eyes were extremely serious.

"...What are you doing?"

"No, I'm not planning on doing anything strange. I couldn't sleep, so..."

"So?"

Searching for the right words. This unease, anxiety and loneliness in his heart, how should he express them? He had come here because of such feelings. Somehow, he felt there was something in this kitchen.

"Wasn't I making dinner earlier? During then, there was a very nostalgic feeling. Right, I must have been doing this sort of thing every day—I thought to myself. I did not need to hesitate over portion sizes and could instantly figure out how to season things to suit everyone's tastes with applause. And eating together with everyone... It felt reassuring."

"..."

"So. Many things happened, umm—What I want to say is this, if there's any hint that could remind me of the past, I won't let go of it. Since I can't sleep, wasting time in the futon seemed wasteful, so thinking that, I came here wondering if I'd remember something with the kitchen knife in my hand perhaps..."

"A-And the result?"

Fear stood very straight and asked. Her sincere eyes were overflowing with guilt.

"...Sorry."

"R-Really?"

Her shoulders slumped. It was obvious she felt disheartened. But as if trying to cover it up, she puffed her chest unnaturally and took a step forward. What clumsy acting skills.

The long and flowing silver hair descended as she crouched down. The girl was noisily ransacking the kitchen cupboard in search of something.

Haruaki could not help but ask.

He shouldn't ask—A warning alarm rang out clearly somewhere in his mind.

"What are you looking for? Want me to help you?"

The reaction was very dramatic. The girl stopped searching the cupboard and looked back forcefully, her face filled with surprise—it was an expression of deep grief that was heartbreakingly watchable.

"You forgot?"

Her voice sounded exceptionally feeble, fearful of the answer. Precisely because she already knew the answer, the fear in her heart was eating away at her delicate body.

"You even forgot my favorite food? The thing I eat every day, the first thing I ate the day I arrived, the thing you gave me to appease me, you forgot it? You really... forgot...?"

It was as though a single sentence had dispelled the magic. Up until this point, she had been nonchalantly treating him as "Yachi Haruaki who had forgotten his memories with them." Consciously, she must have outfitted herself with some kind of filtering mechanism, turning a certain part of her mind sluggish, weakening a certain awareness, numbing a certain sense of recognition. And now, the magic was dispelled in this kitchen.

She was forced to confront what had been lost, bared in full view.

"...Sorry."

There was a crashing sound. Retreating unsteadily, Fear had smashed into the fridge. Her head bowed down, her silver hair was obscuring her expression.

"Everything—Everything—The time when I ran over to school on my own, when that woman with the strong arms came, when I planned on sleeping at the bottom of the sea, when you carried me home on your back, when I started school officially, when we met Sovereignty and Shiraho, when Kuroe came home, when helping at the beauty parlor's opening—You forgot everything?"

Ahhh, something seems to be surfacing now but disappeared. What should have been experienced and all sorts of unknowns. Don't disappear, I beg you, don't disappear. If you stay, this girl won't have to cry out like this. Haruaki clenched his fist tightly. Compared to not being able to recall his memories or everything else, the grieving sounds of this girl before him was the most unbearable.

"What about more recent events? Watching me as I practiced dancing? Eating roasted sweet potatoes together, the puppy going incontinent in Aiko's arms, the argument caused when you asked her to take off her clothes? R-Right, remember—"

Saying that, she opened the fridge behind her and took out a can of juice to show Haruaki. Judging from the excessively fancy colors, it was definitely a niche flavored drink.

"You bought this. You bought it for me! The instant just before Abyss erased your memories... Merely just an instant, at the picnic...!"

"...Sorry, I... can't remember."

Perhaps his own voice was shaking. Shaking even harder than she was.

Hearing his answer, she suddenly stopped moving. There was a sound coming from her throat similar to a gasp. Violently, she ripped away the ring to open the canned juice and started drinking it all at once. Finally, she dangled the emptied can weakly from her hand.

"It tastes terrible... So terrible! Absolutely terrible! Ahhh jeez—!"

She collided her head into Haruaki's chest. The silver hair swayed at extremely close range. Then without moving away, without letting their body warmth separate, her voice said with loneliness:

"...It tastes so terrible I'm about to burst into tears..."

"Sorry."

"I won't forgive you! How dare you buy something like this... Idiot! You're an idiot..."

Next came an attack on his abdomen. Thud thud thud—very feeble yet very painful punches landed on his flank a great many times. At the same time, her forehead struck his chest repeatedly in a similar manner. This soft sensation of her long hair. It's something he was supposed to find familiar.

Otherwise, he would not be experiencing this feeling of grief.

"I am... an idiot?"

"Yes! Not only an idiot, you are also a shameless brat..."

Showing even more suffering on her face than Haruaki, she told Haruaki about the Haruaki he did not know.

Such as suddenly looking at her nude body, his arm getting stabbed, jumping into the sea, toying with her embarrassing spot, staring at an air-headed girl's body, getting kidnapped, etc etc—

"...Am I really that much of a pervert?"

"You're the shameless brat."

Knock. Thud.

More attacks from the forehead and the fist.

"Also, why does it seem like I keep running into hardship? Like getting kidnapped."

"...Yeah. I think you've always been causing us trouble."

The rhythm of her attacks was disrupted for an instant, but then the "thud" of her fist came again.

What followed immediately was an extremely heart-wrenching whisper, sounding as though it were forced out whilst enduring great pain.

"Perhaps—to you, your current state is better. You're a nice guy to a fault and you always meddle too far in others' affairs. Forget about cursed tools, forget about helping us lift our curses, forget all the abnormalities in life—Just live your peaceful life as a guy who loves to cook. Perhaps that might be for the best."

I don't want that.

For some reason, this answer surfaced in Haruaki's mind reflexively.



But before he could say it—

"But!"

"...!"

Thud—This time the punch on his flank really hurt quite a bit.

"But, I—I don't want that! I want you to be my friend forever! Beside me, taking care of me, praising my hard work when I am trying hard—That's how I hope for things to be..."

"..."

"Sorry, this is my willfulness. Sorry for being so willful, sorry..."

Her attacks had stopped before he could notice. Clutching Haruaki's clothes, her hand stopped as though she did not wish to separate from him, as though she would not let him leave. But she was using a very subdued forced—if he wished, he could instantly pull himself away from her hand.

But he did not wish for that.

That was not his wish.

He did not wish to remain in his current state—Wasn't that what I was also thinking just now? Idiot! Hurry up and tell her!

"Haha... I've been doing all the apologizing until now."

"...?"

Shining with silver and transparent luster, she lifted her head. Haruaki smiled wryly as he gazed down at her face.

"I know, okay. I don't know much but I know this... I have never thought to myself that my current amnesia would be for the best. I want to recover my memories, recover all the times I've spent with you girls—Maybe putting it a bit embarrassingly, I want our memories."

"Seriously...?"

"Seriously."

Then Haruaki reached out and caressed her head.

So soft and warm, what wondrous touch.

He did not want to remain in amnesia, definitely because—Indeed.

Having experienced this sense of touch before, forgetting a single instance would be a waste.

Just an insignificant reason like this would be sufficient. No mistake about it.

Feeling the touch of Haruaki's hand on her head, Fear recalled the question she had just asked herself.

—How deep did her resolve run?

The answer was decided. Now that things had reached this point, she clearly steeled her resolve.

—Her resolve was infinite and bottomless.

Yes, my fellow kin, my brethren born from curses. This sin must definitely be grave. Equivalent to a lifetime of murder, or even worse crimes, steeped in sin, deserving to be cursed.

To be honest, she had been hesitant so far. Having committed such crimes, was it really okay? She felt troubled. However, she now had a reason. Because she knew, this was not simply willfulness. Even having lost his memories, but precisely because he was definitely still himself, she believed in his words.

This reason was already sufficient.

Because she no longer doubted, for the sake of being together with him, she mustered unlimited resolve.

The sin of killing her own kind, perhaps that might be unforgivable. But even so, she would still gladly accept this culpability.

Indeed.

Tomorrow, she was going to find «Narrow Narrow Abyss»—

As well as Tateoka Aiko who was going to stand in their way as an enemy—

And destroy them.

Chapter 4 - Not Warm / "In a sports day, the school that means her is sealed up"

Part 1

Monday—sports day. For most people, this would be a holiday but for the students of Taishyuu Private High School, that was not so. This was the very day of the long awaited sports festival. Along the usual route to school, apart from themselves, Haruaki's group could spot students all over the place, carrying school bags that were lighter than normal.

Fear looked up at the sky with unease:

"Hmm, the sky has darkened, the weather is overcast, Haruaki! What should we do? If it rains, what should we do?"

"The weather report said the chances of rain are 50%, right? ...But even if there's a little rain, the sports festival will still be held, don't worry!"

"What if it rains heavily, then what!? Damn it, you're all too slow!"

"You're the one going too fast! Even if you get there early, it's not going to start any earlier."

Although quite a lot had happened and they were facing a difficult situation, a sports festival was still a sports festival. One could hardly blame Fear for her enthusiasm... Just as Haruaki sighed, Konoha smiled as she walked beside him. It was an unbelievable smile expressing both loneliness and happy cohabitation.

"Hmm, what's up?"

"Nothing much... How should I put this? Somehow it feels as though you're different from yesterday, Haruaki-kun, or rather, you look very normal... Or perhaps, I should say you resemble Haruaki-kun from before..."

"Yeah, but I'm still confused about many things. Maybe it's better to say that I've mentally overcome certain issues after a day...? It feels like... All I can do is take things in stride. Of course, I still want to recover my memories with you all, so for this purpose, I will help in any way I can no matter what."

"Haruaki-kun, you just need to act as usual. Indeed... Taking things in stride is perhaps the correct approach. Speaking of which, do you still remember about Ueno-san?"

"Eh? Class Rep? What about her?"

There seemed to be some kind of blockage in his thoughts but he could not remember. Konoha shook her head lightly:

"Nothing... Well, I guess this might be better after all. She probably won't be happy to talk about this subject anyway and it's not like she's going to bring it up on her own initiative. Don't worry about it."

"If that's what you say, I won't think about it..."

While conversing over these matters, they finally reached the school. The sight awaiting them was a great change from the school's usual appearance. Above the school entrance, there was a magnificent gate for promoting the sports festival, exhibiting a kind of grandness not normally seen. But as though this was not enough, further decorations were still being added. Standing on a tall ladder, happily at work—A maid.

"...A maid? What's going on, I have this urge to make a snide comment yet at the same time, I feel like it wouldn't matter..."

"Oh, it's Haruaki-kun, Fear-chan and Konoha-chan. Good morning~"

The maid smiled cheerfully and waved to them. Ugh—Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away.

"Hi Sovereignty, you're really energetic today... Oh my!"

"Sovereignty-san, your skirt, your skirt! Just standing in that position is already quite dangerous, how could you not be more careful!?"

"Eh? Uwawa... It's all exposed~!"

Because she turned around politely on the ladder to face Haruaki's group, Sovereignty's skirt ended up getting caught by the ladder. The surrounding male students quickened their pace and hurried to walk through the gates... Faced with such good fortune at the beginning of school, they probably would discuss this topic for the whole day.

As if supervising the maid—Sovereignty—at work, the cool beauty of a secretary was standing at the bottom of the ladder. Hyoujou Zenon. Haruaki remembered her name.

Good morning everyone—She bowed her head without smiling at all. Konoha whispered softly to her:

"Oh, Zenon-san, good morning... Sorry for calling you so suddenly yesterday, are things okay?"

"Yes. To be honest, these decorations are just for camouflage. The monitoring security cameras were just installed for their original purpose. I've always felt that there was a need for them and now came the perfect opportunity."

"...But doesn't it seem a little strange for them to be installed by the original culprit who first created a need for them?"

Fear looked up the ladder as she spoke. Sovereignty laughed "Ehehe~" in embarrassment as she scratched her head.

"Once the sports festival begins, more guards are scheduled to be stationed here—Not only that, but there will also be patrolling personnel to stay vigilant for intruders from outside. Due to the bizarre murder incident earlier, these extra measures won't arouse any suspicions."

That reason also stemmed from Bivorio—Fear muttered as though she had recalled an unpleasant memory, but immediately shook her head:

"If they came, what are you going to do?"

"I will be instantly alerted of any unusual signs whereupon I shall inform Konoha-sama immediately. I hope you will keep your cellphone by your side."

"Understood. When the time comes, we'll rely on your help to divert bystanders and lead the enemy to remote locations and trap them there. But it's really going to be difficult."

"No, making the sports festival a success is part of my job. Since suspicious parties might be making an appearance, I will handle things with full force."

Although Haruaki did not quite understand, Zenon appeared to be a reliable ally. Indeed, they could neither let other students get caught up in

the troubles nor allow their safety to be at risk. It was imperative to handle matters cleanly by themselves.

Sovereignty apparently finished her task at this moment and slowly climbed down the ladder.

"So~ Haruaki-kun... I've heard about it. So you've forgotten me too?"

"Eh... Uh, umm, sorry."

"How could this happen..."

She lowered her gaze in grief and held Haruaki's hand tightly.

"Haruaki-kun, you're the one who saved us! And that's how we became friends. I never would have thought you'd forget... It feels... so lonely..."

Probably a spontaneous motion—Sovereignty's gentle fingers slid across Haruaki's hand back and forth. Haruaki experienced what felt like the body temperature of a soothing yet embarrassed girl. Then that temperature began to gently entwine Haruaki's fingers one by one. Clearly only his fingers were being touched but Haruaki felt as though his body was being embraced by her. Slowly and tenderly, she closed her eyes halfway and continued to caress Haruaki's fingers without special meaning.

Unused to this type of skin to skin contact, Haruaki wondered if he should push her away? But that felt kind of rude, so what exactly should he do? Just as Haruaki grew frantic—

"W-We're going to be late, Haruaki, let's hurry~!"

"Oh dear, I suddenly feel so dizzy! Why can't I stand steadily!?"

"Uwah!"

Fear and Konoha crashed into Haruaki's back simultaneously. After the impact, by the time he regained his senses, Haruaki found himself dragged along their way with the two girls grabbing each of his arms respectively.

Walking in this manner, the two girls made a look of confidence and turned their heads towards Sovereignty.

"Don't worry, Sovereignty-san."

"That's right, this guy will be back to normal by tomorrow—That said, his shamelessness will remain unaffected."

"U-Uh... Yes. If you need any help, please let me know."

Bye bye~ The maid waved goodbye to them. As they walked towards the school building, Haruaki asked the two girls beside him:

"...That girl just now, what's her relationship with us?"

"She's the secretary's assistant at the superintendent's office."

"The first time we met her, you allowed her to sit straddled on your body. You were even happy about it."

"She's lovers with a girl named Shiraho-san. By the way, she's actually a boy."

"Your eyes looked unusual when you were staring at her belly button."

"I don't get what the heck you girls are talking about!"

How strange... Surely he was not that excessive of a pervert? But try as he might, Haruaki could not remember. He slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

For sure, he needed to retrieve his memories as quickly as possible. If this continued, he could not even trust himself anymore... But at the very least, he probably did not harbor any impure thoughts towards a boy, did he?

Part 2

The sports festival started. All the sights and scenes were quite new and refreshing for Fear. All the students were dressed in either gym clothes or tracksuits. Colorful arches were laid out on opposite sides of the sports ground while simple tents were set up around the track. There were also many parents dressed in casual clothing with their cameras prepared. Although it was not because someone was watching her, Fear somehow still felt nervous and avoided looking in that direction. School on a holiday, school without lessons, school that was like yet unlike school, all this contributed to an incredible feeling.

The opening ceremony. Having everyone do warmup exercises together felt stupid but happy. "The superintendent's speech"—Delivered by the man in the gas mask, it really was quite strange. Perhaps to avoid attracting undue attention, he instantly retreated out of sight into the VIP tent. In contrast to the students' nonchalance, the tumult in the parents seemed quite amusing.

Soon after, the competitions began. Despite the unfortunate, overcast weather, the students still showed great enthusiasm. Fear heard live cheering she had never heard before, stirring up a sense of eagerness in her heart... But Fear did not forget.

(Who knows when Abyss or Bivorio might show up. Although Zenon is keeping watch, I can't be too careless...)

Glare, glare—Fear's gaze patrolled the surroundings. No matter what, finding a way to take care of those people is the top goal. Compared to competing in events, she must prioritize staying vigilant. Sorry, everyone, please don't rely on me in the sports events, do your best... Thinking that to herself, Fear went over to where she had to stand by for her first event.

Then—

"H-Haruaki Haruaki! What's going on? The white team's points are the lowest! But I clearly got first place!"

"That's because it relies on the points from all the members. Isn't this only natural? Besides, the sports festival is only halfway through. This is my first time seeing someone getting so serious about it!"

Haruaki explained to Fear who had come running to tug his shirt. This resulted in—

"What are you talking about, Haruaki? Without halfway, how could there be any results!? You should learn from Fear-chan's serious motivation instead! Fear-chan is our role model for the white team to reflect on, Fear-chan in the mirror! Woo!"

The idiot classmate, namely Taizou, was supporting Fear with astounding vigor. Haruaki frowned:

"You seem to be in even higher spirits than usual..."

"And you, Haruaki, are acting just like an old man as usual!"

Yes—Fear nodded with heartfelt agreement. Taizou grabbed Haruaki by the shoulder:

"Listen carefully, I have gambled my life on this sports festival but for one purpose, victory!"

"Eh... Although I can understand your passionate enthusiasm, this really isn't something worth gambling your life over."

"...Haruaki, you couldn't have forgotten? Didn't the superintendent just say? He is offering a luxurious prize to the winning team to express his modest goodwill!"

"Eh? Did he say that...? Also, isn't a luxurious prize kind of contradictory to modest goodwill!?"

"Stop worrying about those little details, this is a display of Japanese subtlety! According to my prior investigations, the prize apparently consists of tickets to a certain entertainment facility... Hoho, do you realize what this means?"

"No idea." "No idea."

Fear and Haruaki shook their heads at the same time. Taizou laughed eerily in a profound manner and clenched his fist:

"In other words... It gives a legitimate chance to invite the girl you like on a date! 'Given this rare opportunity, would you like to go together?' With just this one question, just by asking this one question... She won't suspect any ulterior motives, thus allowing me to succeed in asking her out on a date! The cliche of 'I happen to have an extra ticket' is out of fashion nowadays. If you say something like that, anyone would know what your intentions are, right? So things have to be natural. Precisely because everyone in the winning team already has a ticket, it will be natural... Hoho, obviously I am going to ask Konoha-san, together with Konoha-san... Then... Then! If only there'd be a warm water pool available on that day! Kukuuheehee!"

"Scary!" "Scary!"

In any case, wouldn't your ulterior motives become instantly exposed... Haruaki thought to himself but did not voice his remark. This was out of consideration as a friend.

"Tickets huh... I don't quite get it, but it's something expensive?"

"Probably, Fear-chan. It must be something cordially designed so that those without courage can still redeem them for cash!"

"Oh... Oho... Cash huh... That means I can buy something I like to my heart's content? Who knows how many bags I could buy...!"

Smiling profoundly, Fear and Taizou exchanged glances and—

"Taizou, the war begins now! We must work for victory!"

"Fear-chan in the mirror!"

As if reaching some kind of understanding, the two shook hands firmly. Watching these two, Haruaki sighed, thinking at the same time—Ahhh, indeed, she's really getting along with the crowd.

Indeed, this was the first time for "his current self" to witness the way she got along harmoniously with Taizou. It gave Haruaki a sense of what the times spent with her were like. She must be quite used to this, getting along with others albeit noisily. Perhaps there were still many issues but she was definitely trying hard, no mistake about it. Just as Haruaki savored this sort of feeling that carried both happiness and loneliness—

"Fear-kun and Taizou, the next event is the borrowing race. It's about time you both head over to the standby area to get ready."

Kirika appeared with the programme schedule in her hand. Due to her roles as the class representative and membership in the executive committee, she also had to manage the competition participants from her class.

As usual, she was dressed from top to bottom in a long-sleeved tracksuit. Although she was not the only student wearing these clothes, people felt hot from exertion as the sports festival progressed and there were very few people who remained dressed in this manner.

Watching Kirika send off Fear and Taizou, Haruaki stared at her involuntarily and thought... Doesn't she feel hot? Did the saying, cool minds naturally result in cool bodies, actually work? Who knew how Kirika was interpreting his gaze, but she blushed and approached, saying as she brushed past him:

"...W-What's with your staring? I'm not taking it off unless you're the only one watching, that much is obvious, right?"

She whispered swiftly as though she were sulking slightly yet extremely shy at the same time.

To think she would say something like that.

"...Eh?"

Kirika walked past without turning her head, her ponytail swaying. What? Was there some sort of deeper meaning in what she said just now? Haruaki felt like he was about to remember—But in the end, he could not recall.

This was terrible. Extremely terrible.

Sure enough—Am I really that much of a pervert? Furthermore, it seemed as though I were a pervert in all ways to an unimaginable extent. I'm the worst.

Part 3

The borrowing race. Although Fear had already listened to the explanation earlier, it was still quite difficult to understand in practice. After all, "competitions" were a totally new experience for her. The first race she participated only involved running so she managed fine. But for this event where there were additional rules, she felt rather ill at ease.

While waiting on standby, she used her exceptional eyesight to confirm the runner's unrolled scrolls and studied in advance.

(First open this up while running. Written there is... That's 'handkerchief'... Oh? It's okay to leave the track? Then borrow from other students... Even from the parents... Then show the objects to the executive committee in front of the finish line, raise the white flag and set off again to run towards the finish line. Seems simpler than I imagined! There's many types of things to borrow here. 'An elementary schooler or younger.' 'Dog.' 'Young housewife.' 'Belt.' 'Zippo lighter.' 'Person you like'... Some of these things are incomprehensible... Oh well, I'll just find someone to ask. If the object required is human, I guess I can just lead them by the hand to the finish line?)

Okay, studying complete.

As it so happened it was now time for Fear and the participants to start the race. Under the executive committee's signal, they all moved to the starting line.

(Run, open up the paper, borrow stuff, run! That's all!)

The dry bang of the starter's pistol was heard. Run forward! Run forward! Be careful not to run too far, run forward! Even so, Fear was still the first to arrive at the location where the borrowing paper was placed.

(Then open it!)

The words entering her view were:

«Giant Bust».

"..."

For some reason, Fear felt a murderous impulse for an instant. Who was it? Who the heck prepared this kind of thing?

And written carefully in small handwriting in the corner of the paper were the words "Obvious beyond any doubt." Speaking of someone who matched this condition... Fear turned her head and glanced sideways. As much as she did not wish to search, her neck swiveled on its own.

Instantly, she found her target, Cow Tits. Under the tents used by students, her eyes squinting behind those glasses, glaring sharply, turning left and right surreptitiously. Like herself, Cow Tits must be looking out for enemies—At this moment, their gazes met suddenly. Cow Tits puffed her chest out slightly and apparently snorted. "What are you doing? Hurry and finish the race so that you can return to your place to keep watch!"—Fear imagined her saying such words. I know without needing you to tell me! Retorting in her heart, Fear resolved herself "I'd rather die than ask this woman for help!" as she watched the bulge under Cow Tits' gym clothes jump merely from puffing her chest.

But then what should she do? Was there anyone else? After all, isn't this what's known as sexual harassment? To borrow a giant bust. To borrow a giant bust. Wait, it didn't say borrow "a woman with a giant bust," so it should be okay to stuff soccer balls in front of one's chest and walk proudly to the finish line, how's that... No way, that feels as though it would create a legend that people will talk about for a decade. And a dishonorable one too, of course.

So, she still needed to find someone else right now—Just as Fear ran aimlessly.

"Do your best~ Ficchi~"

She heard a voice like that. Looking up, she found Kuroe standing in the front row of the parents area.

Dressed in a bright and colorful outfit with a miniskirt and many frills, holding pompoms in her hands—

Indeed, this was the cheerleader look she had seen on television before.

Fear's footsteps and thoughts were drawn over there.

"W-What are you doing ?"

"I'm going to bring packed lunches and cheer for you all later—Didn't I say that?"

"I heard that, yes... But what's with this shameless outfit!?"

"This is a true and proper cheerleader's outfit. Oh, don't worry, you see, there are athletic bloomers underneath... Look?"

Kuroe lifted up her skirt. Was that thing any different from underwear? Small in area, navy blue in fabric... Even if did not count as underwear, the sight of those exposed thighs felt quite shameless. Men in the surroundings also kept throwing glances over here.

"Let's not worry about that for now, Ficchi, what do you need to borrow? If it's something I possess..."

"Ah... R-Right! But unfortunately, it's something you don't have at all!"

Kuroe tilted her head in puzzlement.

"...Sexiness?"

"You don't have any of that either, but no! Damn it...!"

Fear's rhythm was all disrupted because of that strange sight just now. Having borrowed successfully, some of the other runners were already making their way towards the finish line. This was no good... Ignoring Kuroe, Fear turned her head. Rather than the students' or the parents' tents, she had discovered a figure in the VIP tent who was waving and cheering for her.

Dressed as a maid, a very conspicuous girl. Sovereignty.

(Muu~ Hers are quite large indeed, but regarding 'obvious beyond any doubt'... Well...)

A flash of inspiration occurred to her at this time. Speaking of which, that girl can...!

Following this flash of inspiration, Fear went beyond the track and raced towards her.

"H-Hiyaaa! W-What's the matter, Fear-chan, what's going on?"

"You! I need you! But it's not large enough currently! So it needs to grow bigger!"

Indeed, Fear remembered that Sovereignty's breasts could be enlarged to a certain extent—!

"W-What... What is this about?"

"Damn it, there's no time left to explain! Grope it, right? Just groping it will work, right?"

Rushing over and pushing Sovereignty down on the ground, Fear groped. She groped seriously.

"A-Ahhh... No, Fear-chan, doing this kind of thing... Makes me... So embarrassed..."



"It's nothing, it'll be over soon! No one's gonna notice! Come, you can do it!
If it's you, it should work!"

"I-I'm being forced~ I have no say in this... Huff... Ah..."

"..."

Bathed under the gaze of the school's entire student body, Fear naturally came in last.

In the process, she created a legend that students would sing for a decade—the "sports festival's maid breast groping incident."

"Just now, what the heck were you doing..."

"Sh-Shut up! It's only because it's my first time, I got a bit confused."

"To that extent? Jeez."

The morning competitions (apart from the legend Fear created) all ended peacefully. Haruaki and his group were walking towards the parents' section. Despite thinking "that girl isn't a boy, just as I thought!" to himself, Haruaki did not feel there was a need to bring up the subject again, so he kept silent.

Looking over the parents' seating, the target was instantly located. Because she was dressed in sharp colors.

"Good effort, everyone."

"R-Right! Kuroe, it's your fault for dressing in this strange getup, making me confused and losing my rhythm! How are you going to compensate me!?"

"I only wanted to dress up cuter to cheer for you all... Sob sob, how you break my heart."

Kuroe lowered her blank gaze. A voice came from behind at this moment:

"O-Okay okay, I'm not bothered anymore, so everyone, please don't let it weigh on your mind."

Saying that, Sovereignty showed up, causing everyone else to remark at her appearance.

'Another one!'

Instead of the maid outfit, she was now dressed as a cheerleader to match Kuroe. Shaking the pompoms with subtle joy, she jumped up and down, her miniskirt fluttering.

"W-Why..."

"Sovereignty is my dear friend. So I was thinking, at least for days like this one, we should dress up the same way to cheer for everyone."

"Ehehe, how is it!? Is it cute? I asked for Zenon-san's permission before wearing it and she nodded so vigorously I could almost see afterimages."

Her? Somehow, the image did not seem to match her... Haruaki thought. Yet Fear and Konoha were smiling politely as though they were saying "of course she would act that way." How baffling.

Some male students passed nearby at this moment. Seeing Sovereignty in her cheerleading outfit, they poked each other in the ribs:

"Hey, look over there!"

"Oh yeah, Sovereignty-chan... That outfit gives her a very fresh look too~ It feels wonderful..."

"I knew it, cute people look cute no matter what they wear. Precisely because there're bloomers underneath, the miniskirt is allowed to flutter... I'm truly... How should I say this? ...I feel utter bliss just watching this..."

"You're in the way. Scram."

A girl with exquisite facial features stepped in front of the boys and crossed her arms with displeasure. That's Shiraho-san—Konoha whispered to Haruaki.

The boys were apparently from Shiraho's class. Boy A smiled politely:

"S-Sorry sorry, we're leaving at once."

"Furthermore, although I didn't quite catch it clearly, if you people keep having these weird conversations, your conduct will be called into question. If you're going to chat, chat somewhere you won't be heard."

"W-Well said. Sakuramairi-san and Sovereignty-chan really are quite close. N-No, if you didn't catch it clearly, please don't mind it! Seriously, it wasn't anything important at all."

This was Boy B's answer.

"Don't just decide on your own to add the '-chan' honorific to my lov—friend's name, okay!?"

"Mm-hmm, sorry. Well then, we'll be on our way—"

Shiraho smiled lightly in a "Good if you understand" sort of way and kept the same expression as she said:

"Also, go and die!"

"She heard us after all~!"

"Scolded by Sakuramairi-san? This is my first time, my first time! Encountering double fortune, today must be my lucky day!"

The two boys escaped, fearfully or happily, who knew? Hmph—Shiraho sneered with disinterest and came over to Haruaki's group. She had apparently promised Sovereignty to have lunch with everyone as well.

"If we're going to eat, prepare lunch quickly, human. I want to be done and finished with this ordeal as soon as possible."

...Haruaki could not understand at all what was going in the minds of the boys who felt happy to be scolded.

Then they happened to find a free space which they used to spread out the picnic cloth. Everyone gathered in a circle and started to have lunch. Shiraho glared resentfully at Fear for humiliating Sovereignty; but perhaps because Sovereignty herself did not mind, she felt that bringing the topic up again would not be too appropriate. Hence, Shiraho finally sighed in exasperation without saying anything.

Not long after that, Kirika also joined them, having agreed to have lunch together beforehand.

"Sorry I'm late. There was some executive committee work to do."

As for Taizou and Kana who usually ate with them, today they were apparently having lunch with their families who had come to cheer for them. In other words, the ones present were all the members of the group whose parents were not here.

"Yachi, what about today? I don't really mind."

"Eh? Oh yeah, could it be... The lunchbox duel?"

"What do you mean, 'could it be'? There can't be anything else, right?"

"No, at least for today... Look, the usual judging committee isn't here either."

"Hmm... I don't really mind if Fear-kun or Konoha-kun does the judging... But then again, it's hard for them to judge impartially the taste they're used to eating every day. It can't be helped."

Hence, Kirika opened the lunchbox she had prepared for everyone to share.

Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness. He and Kirika still maintained their daily ritual of the lunchbox duel, so nothing had happened to jeopardize this relationship. As for her puzzling words earlier, Haruaki decided not to delve too deeply into them.

The seven of them enjoyed their lunch noisily and happily. This was partially due to their high spirits from the sports festival, but this was supposed to be how it was normally, right? Haruaki only had an ambiguous feeling about the latter, but he knew.

However, he felt slightly uneasy. This was only natural. The incident had not resolved at all. Rather, nothing had happened yet and it was worrying. Fear, Konoha and Kuroe as well, the three of them were discreetly vigilant of their surroundings while they ate.

If anything were to happen, it would be coming up next, right?

As if reflecting Haruaki's internal mood, the wind suddenly felt rather chilly.

"...Looks like a storm is coming."

Looking up at the overcast sky which had darkened, Kirika murmured to herself.

Part 4

No choice but to do it. No choice but to do it.

If I didn't, he won't grant my wish. Hence, I have no choice but to do it—

Under the dark and gloomy sky, the appointed time arrived and she began her operation.

Apart from the two security guards standing at the school gates in their navy blue uniforms, there were no signs of anyone else.

"Hmm...? H-Hey, this girl, you're not thinking of..."

She grabbed the arm of the guard who was taking out his walkie-talkie as he looked towards her, thus preventing him from using it. Sports were not really her thing, but handling a normal human was still within her abilities. Using inhuman strength to twist the guard's arm behind his back, she grabbed his face and threw him hard towards the other guard. The two men crashed together and collided into the boundary wall next to the school gates, ending up collapsed on the ground. Perhaps having been hit somewhere inappropriate such as their head, the two guards lost consciousness.

After spending merely an instant to ponder what to do, she decided to just leave them as they were. Lucky for them. If they were inside the school, she would have no choice but to kill them.

Passing through the vivid and colorful gates, she placed her hand on the original gates that were retracted behind the school walls. She felt the touch of heavy steel.

Once the gates were closed, there would be no turning back.

She was surely going to be cursed. Just like what had always happened to this point, but perhaps to a much further extent.

Ahhh, she did not actually want this. She hated it so much that she wanted to cry. However, in order to erase these hated things, to erase everything included in the past—She must do this.

Noticing her tears streaming down as expected, she swept her bangs aside and wiped them.

She decided that these were going to be her final tears. Let things begin once these tears were wiped. Freezing her heart as usual, acting like a tool as usual, engaging in cursed behavior as usual, starting as usual.

Sorry, sorry. I am still me, sorry.

Thus, I...

I don't want to be me anymore.

Applying force through her hand, she dragged the school gate. The iron gate grated noisily as it slammed shut.

The lid called the school gate was now closed, thereby separating "this space" from "the space outside."

What was a pot? A sealed space.

And what was she? A pot.

Hence, this sealed space was herself.

So that was that. Who knew who defined it that way, but that was how it was—

"Delineation of the boundary. Sacrifices existing in the vessel. Sacrifices cannibalizing one another, devouring one another to create a curse."

She muttered to herself.

Her hand on the school gates felt the sensation of rain. The feeling of raindrops gradually intensified.

As if punishing her, the raindrops struck the back of her hand hard.

Then after a while—She was reluctant to loosen her grip, regretfully savoring the sensation of ice-cold punishment. Then slowly, slowly—

"...The name of the technique is Indigo Venom. Indigo-colored gu poison. Born from the Indigo Vessel to devour humans—"

Turning around, she walked under the rain.

In this vessel called a school.

The vessel existing only for the creation of curses.

For the sake of giving birth to those countless noises she was already accustomed to.

Part 5

After finishing their lunch swiftly, Fear and Konoha left the cleaning up to Haruaki and the rest and made their way to the tent that was used as a

changing room. The first event in the afternoon was the cheerleading battle. Using the arches constructed by the arch teams as a backdrop, the dance teams were going to perform the creative dances they had been practicing all this time.

"Oh Fear-chan, how's it going? The long-awaited moment has finally arrived! Wooha, the atmosphere is boiling with excitement!"

Kana, who had already entered the tent, patted Fear on the shoulder. Had it been Fear a week earlier, she would probably have returned a convulsive smile? But now was different. Puffing her chest out proudly and holding her head high, Fear declared:

"Hmph hpmh, I'm completely prepared. The dance will be perfect."

Wow, the surrounding classmates shouted to raise morale amidst laughter. There were also people clapping loudly.

"Fear-chan, you've been working hard! I'm so happy too... Very well, we'll use your perfect dancing to charm the audience, teammate Fear! Come come, hurry and change!"

"U-Umu."

"Konoha, come change as well! Is it already adjusted? If the chest area is still too tight, then we'll just have to make do with the forbidden secret move of the 'wardrobe malfunction,' okay?"

"I-I definitely made adjustments already before I came, there won't be a problem!"

Fear took off her gym clothes, placed them on the long table inside the tent and changed into the dancing outfit. Since she had tried it on before and had adjustments made, the size was just right, however—

"Umu, how should I say this... Dressing up like this is quite shameless after all, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about at this point~!? Wow, super cute! Choosing Fear-chan to join the dance team was definitely my correct decision~!"

Fear was standing before the full-length mirror that was prepared for the dancers, checking out her appearance. The outfit used the team's color of white as a base with additional colors for decoration. It was made from flimsy fabric. Indeed it was quite cute, but the level of exposure seemed

subtly excessive... Such as revealing the navel or the like. Was this attire really appropriate for a high school sports festival?

"Uh... Am I okay, dressed like this?"

Hearing Konoha's voice, Fear turned her gaze towards Konoha. Uguu... Fear gasped.

If she were forced to use one word to describe the image, that would be—voluptuous.

"Uwoah~ Konoha, your destructive power is quite astounding too...!"

"U~wah, seriously, this is seriously making me jealous, Konoha-chan, what have you got stuffed inside? May I touch them, please~"

"Eh? Eh? Umm, wait a minute...?"

Having changed, all the team members gathered with interest, one after another.

"Guha, these are truly amazing!" "What have you been eating?" "It's the meat! The meat is rebelling! The frenzied meat is running away!" "Aren't they heavy?" "They're so soft." "Don't get taken in, these are just something like balloons, suck all the air out!" "When did you start filling out like this~?" "From now on, they'll start deflating! Come, everyone, let's all grope her hard!"...

"Hold it... Ow! W-Who is it, such a truly hateful act—Fear-san! It really must be you!"

"Tsk."

Slide—Just as Fear nonchalantly removed herself from the crowd—

Splatter splatter! She suddenly heard an intense noise from above.

"Woah~ It's raining... And so heavily too."

"W-What~ This is worrying! They won't cancel the festival, will they!?"

"Hard to say... I hope they just postpone the event..."

Hearing Kana's words, Fear poked her head out of the tent to look outside. The rain was truly astounding. Bean-sized raindrops were mercilessly battering the sports ground while students and parents were frantically

running into nearby tents for shelter. Even the tents' ceilings were shaking hard, so the rain really was quite heavy. Even if there were people carrying umbrellas, probably very few of them would actually want to stand outside in such conditions.

Hence, precisely because of that—

Despite the poor visibility under the rain—Fear could still clearly see a figure outside, standing there without an umbrella.

Not on the sports ground but closer to the school building. This was a vantage point where one could barely observe the situation on the sports ground.

Over there was the figure of a man in a suit, pushing a woman in a wheelchair.

"Cow Tits!"

"...!"

Sensing the unusual presence, Konoha instantly charged towards the tent's entrance. Just as she was about to rush out into the rain—

"Phew~ Sorry, please let me take shelter here..."

Sovereignty had arrived at this tent. She should be on her way back to the executive committee's tent? This was perfect timing.

"Hey! Could you tell Kuroe for me, I'm leaving Haruaki in her hands! Those guys have arrived!"

"Thanks, Sovereignty-san!"

"E-Eh...?"

As Fear and Konoha rushed out, they could hear Sovereignty's puzzled voice and Kana going "W-What's going on~?" Blown sideways by the wind, the rain instantly drenched their clothes.

The duo near the school building also seemed to notice Fear and Konoha rushing at them and turned to move away from the sports ground. How could I possibly let you two escape!?

While running along the muddy ground, Fear muttered to herself:

"Let's confirm first... Just us two, will it be okay?"

"I am a bit worried for there have been no signs of Aiko-san so far. Although Haruaki-kun is together with other students, with no idea what kind of move the enemy will be making, we can't leave him alone. Just as you said, Kuroe-san should stay by Haruaki-kun's side."

"Kirika as well... Due to suddenness of everything, she still doesn't know about the situation but we can't ask for her help this late in the game."

"She seems to be quite busy with the executive committee's work. Besides, we can't go inform her now but end up losing track of these two."

Konoha made an extremely cold and frightening smile.

"In any case—Even if I were alone, I have no intention of losing to that man."

A simple sideways glance was enough to send shivers down a one's spine. Fear really did not want to be enemies with Konoha the way she was right now.

The wheelchair woman and the man were moving along the school building, apparently towards the building's unguarded side door. Were they planning on entering there...? After the sports festival began, the school building should have been locked up.

But for people who were not normal, locks did not pose any problem at all. Pursuing the pair closely, Fear and Konoha were confronted by the sight of the school building's side door that was damaged outright. Entering the door whose handle was broken, they followed the footprints lingering in the corridor. The footprints led upstairs. What were they planning, even going as far as to carry the wheelchair up the stairs?

Then in the corridor of the third floor, they finally caught up to them.

"Hold it and stand still, Abyss and Bivorio!"

"...If someone asked you to stand still, Alice, would you actually do so?"

"Indeed, Abyss."

With a high-pitched grating sound from the wheelchair, the pair turned towards the girls in an unhurried manner. Abyss was dressed in his usual suit and leather gloves while Bivorio was in casual clothing and wearing

her monocle. But instead of her clattering watches, Alice's arms were wearing opera gloves that a noblewoman would wear, with matching colors with Abyss.

Bivorio suddenly looked out the window and murmured to herself:

"Such heavy rain... But looking out from here, it feels as though the rain is falling somewhere distant. Let me title this scene 'Out of the Metal Toy Box,' how's that? Ufufu, a toy box that has been placed into a waterfall."

There was no time to chat or joke around. Fear took out the Rubik's cube she had stuffed under her costume and stepped forward.

"What are you people doing?"

"Captured in one sentence: taking a stroll. Quite a delightful one, in fact. This building is so devoid of people that one would like to praise the Lord."

"Because this is my first time to enter a school... Ufufu, I'd like to observe all sorts of things. To be honest, we were already here since last night."

"You were already inside from the very beginning... So that's why the security perimeter was not triggered."

Hearing Konoha's words, Abyss and Bivorio exchanged glances, going "security perimeter?" Then Abyss shrugged:

"I see, Kururi has apparently fallen into your hands. You knew we were coming here... So it looks like she was forced to confess the truth."

"Ara ara, how wonderful. Then that means Kururi must have had her longtime wish fulfilled. Fear-sama, how was it? It must have been quite a long time since you last performed interrogation? Did you enjoy it fully? Did you savor the screams carefully?"

"...Screw it with the joking! I didn't do anything like that!"

"Oh? Never mind, it's of no consequence... The problem is the security perimeter. Had we known that, we should have asked her to stay together with us."

"That cannot be helped, Abyss. It is most effective right now when the greatest number of people are present. Besides, she also has a task she needed to complete over at the gates. It's called 'boundary delineation,' right?"

"What are you two talking about!?"

Abyss stroked his beard slightly, adjusted his hat a bit and narrowed one eye:

"Simply stated, you're about to find out that we're just red herrings."

"Wha—"

"Hmm...?"

Konoha suddenly shook. Frantically, she reached into her clothes and took out the vibrating cellphone. Glaring at Abyss, she pressed the phone to her ear:

"...Hello? Yes? Don't worry about making a move. Just keep a close to see if the students have been reached or not."

"Hey, Cow Tits, what—"

Putting the cellphone away in her chest, Konoha pointed her finger at the window.

"Fear-san, please jump out from here."

"Wha... Wha?"

"Do you see the school gates over there? Please jump down from here—Aiko-san has arrived. Zenon-san just called to report."

While staying vigilant of Abyss and Bivorio's movements, Fear went over and opened the window, casting a quick glance outside. The school gates were visible under the intense rain. There was indeed a tiny figure at the gates, slowly walking forward without an umbrella.

"You two are not surprised. So that means you knew already?"

"Tsk... What are you planning on making her do?"

"Didn't we tell you already? We are just red herrings. She is the actual lead character in this performance. My original plan was to have it finished before I persuaded you with force—But it looks like it'll have to be done concurrently. How troublesome."

"But to sum it up in a single sentence, it's exceedingly simple, Fear-sama. In other words—"

Then displaying a crazy smile that did not seem crazy at all, Bivorio spoke:

"From this point onwards, Aiko-sama has been asked to kill everyone within the school."

"—Go and stop her, in any manner of your choosing."

"Wha... What?"

Slam—Feeling a strong impact on her back, Fear found herself sent flying by Konoha's shove. By the time she realized it, she was already flying out the window.

"Damn Cow Tits!"

Turning herself in the air, Fear landed on the muddy ground with a splash. She tried looking up but could not see the situation in the third floor corridor anymore. It did not seem like she could climb back up either—

"Tsk. Judging from what you said, I can't leave the situation on this side unhandled either!"

Destroying Abyss, recovering Haruaki's memories—The most important task had been snatched away from her in a moment of vulnerability. Angry as she was, Fear turned her head. There was no choice at this point. Killing everyone within the school? This sort of atrocity would be completely unforgivable no matter who you asked.

Held in one hand, the Rubik's cube swiveled noisily as she approached the figure. The other side was also walking towards her.

At roughly the distance within earshot, the two halted their steps at the same time.

Drenched hair. Eyes obscured as usual, her expression could not be read.

Fear recalled what she had heard from Kururi and spoke up:

"It's been a while, cursed «Pot of Curses»."

"...It's been a while, cursed «Cube of Torture and Execution»."

Responding to Fear was a trembling, hoarse and feeble voice.

The voice of an enemy who must be defeated.

Part 6

—She had killed her uncle.

In context of the overall picture, this was nothing unusual. Due to economic poverty, her whole family had committed suicide. Left as the sole survivor purely by chance, she had been adopted by the relative she hated. That uncle was not worthy of being called human. For many years, a good many years, she suffered from his peculiar abuse.

No one stood on her side. She had no other relatives in the entire world.

In terms of results, having survived suicide, she was nothing more than a corpse anyway.

With neither the courage to resist nor the courage to strike back, she was just a corpse doing nothing but enduring.

When did she start to resurrect? When was the decisive turning point?

Even she had no idea herself.

Was it the moment when she was returning home from middle school and suddenly stopped in front of an antique shop?

That object displayed in the window, its name is so similar to mine—Was it the moment when this trivial remark crossed her mind?

Was it the moment when she went into the shop, intrigued, and listened to the old shopkeeper's stupid story about its origins?

Was it the moment when she was back in her room, staring at the knife she had bought, suddenly feeling a surge of courage to resist the oppressor? Was it the moment when she faced her uncle who was brandishing the kitchen knife as usual, accompanied by the liberating feeling she experienced as she swung her concealed knife?

If she still had not resurrected by the time she finished the act, there was only one possible turning point remaining.

That was after spending several years confined in white walls.

When she was mercilessly released from those walls, arriving in this lonely world, the moment of their encounter.

The moment when he extended his helping hand to her—

"Hmm..."

Upon waking up, the first thing to strike her was the smell of tatami, causing Kururi slight confusion, but immediately, she remembered she was a prisoner.

The light on the other side of the sliding door indicated that the sun was already high up in the sky. The house was quiet without any noise at all. Recalling the commotion last night, Kururi concluded that the home was probably deserted right now.

Indeed, last night. The noisy bustling of dinner and tea after the meal could all be heard from this prison of a room. It was a mixture of several people's voices. Meaningless chatter. Disorganized conversations.

Very family-like, these voices she had never heard before were causing a stinging pain somewhere deep in her heart—

Kururi stopped thinking at this point. Family. Relatives. For her, the only remaining family she had was over there.

"Patriarch..."

The first image she recalled was that of the man waiting for her at the juvenile penitentiary's exit. The man who had provided a new place to live for her who had no one to depend on.

To be honest—She became infatuated with him.

His wife... Kururi did not hate the woman who was like a wife to him. Although she was indeed eccentric, she had welcomed Kururi with gentle eyes. Worlds apart from the real mother who had thrown Kururi off a cliff... She was a mother.

Kururi decided she must go see them. Something—There was a vague sense of unease and nausea occupying her mind, but she deliberately ignored it. She had to see them. She only had to see them.

Because she was part of the Family. She was his family.

There was only one requirement to join the Bivorio Family: deep love for the transcoders known as Wathes.

Naturally, Kururi loved deeply. Whether him or the object that had given her courage and saved her from everything. Without that, she would have

died long ago. She would still be a walking corpse. Hence, Kururi had offered her resurrected self without hesitation.

The Patriarch had helped her steal back the object that had been confiscated as evidence. This was Kururi's first opportunity to experience its curse because she had been arrested as soon as she committed the murder. Nevertheless, she did not feel any revulsion or contempt. As long as she regarded it as the reward she offered in exchange for granting her courage, it was nothing—Hence she has continued to savor the curse even now.

"Leaving a captive alone and running off happily to the sports festival, aren't they underestimating me too much? How incompetent."

The cross-shaped pendant that was merely a concealed knife had fortuitously pulled the wool over her enemies' eyes.

While frowning from the pain in her hands that were tied behind her back, Kururi moved her lower body and slightly raised her lower back. After taking a deep breath—in other words, preparing herself to endure pain—

"«Returning Kukri of Childbirth»...!"

Instantly, a sense of dissonance penetrated her body. To experience the ejection of a foreign object from one's body, that must be quite a rare sensation? Slowly dragged out, accompanied by a grating sound, pangs of convulsions, a symphony played by her own muscles, the blade emerged from the back of her thigh. Clenching her teeth, she endured the pain of her body being sliced open and the discomfort as though her brain had been thrown into a blender.

"Gah... Ah... Huff... Guh... Ahhh!"

Then—Freeing itself from the flesh where it was buried, the blade stabbed into the tatami with a thud. She did not bleed a single drop of blood. Confirming the "<"-shaped and bent design of the knife, Kururi exhaled and relaxed from the disappearance of the pain, with tension leaving her face.

The «Returning Kukri of Childbirth». She remembered the name that the old shopkeeper had told her many years ago along with the story.

Once upon a time, there was a mother whose newborn baby was mercilessly killed by a feudal lord. This was the knife the mother used for

her revenge. In a cautious process to get close to the feudal lord, the mother spent a long period of time to become his mistress. Hiding the knife within her own body, she seduced the feudal lord and assassinated him in bed. But after suffering the lord's counterattack, the mother also died with regret...

Simply stated, hidden in the mother's body for the sake of approaching the feudal lord, the knife was the crystallization of her vengeance and a substitute for the baby that was taken away from her. Hence, in a certain sense, it was only natural that the knife would slip into the user's body as part of its curse.

Whether slipping into the body or when taken out of the body that served as its sheath, only pain was produced without leaving any wounds behind. But Kururi understood that the knife would gradually bury itself deeper into the body. Very likely, she would die once it reached her heart. Even so, it did not matter. Through this knife, she had obtained the courage to kill her uncle, thereby liberating herself from the life of a walking corpse.

"In order to strengthen the curse, I guess I really have to kill more people? I won't curse this curse..."

Muttering to herself, Kururi began to rub the electrical binding her wrists against the knife's blade.

Suddenly, her gaze landed on the plate that had been placed by her side. Covered with plastic wrap, it was a plate of rice balls. Recalling she ended up eating nothing last night—as well as the strange girl who had wanted to feed her hand to mouth, Kururi could not help but click her tongue.

Inside the quiet room, even louder than her tongue-clicking, were the noises made by her stomach.

Part 7

Accompanied by faint sounds of cursing, the silver-haired girl finally disappeared from Konoha's view. Sorry—Simply making a simple apology in her mind, Konoha turned to face the two enemies in the corridor again.

"Killing everyone in school—May I ask a question, is it really for gu poison creation?"

"Indeed. There's no need to go that far if our purpose was simply to abduct the Fear-in-Cube. This is being done in consideration of what comes later."

"What comes later?"

"I don't know the details, but isn't the Lab Chief's Nation assisting you? If we persuade Fear-sama by force, then what we must consider next are countermeasures against those people."

Konoha frowned. That had been Kirika's bluff, originally intended for the possible effect of delaying Bivorio's faction from acting—But unexpectedly, they not only believed it but also plan on overcoming the threat.

"Why do you go so far in your wish to obtain Fear-san? That child is nothing but a dumb little lass."

"I, too, have asked the same question. Praise the Lord."

"Didn't I answer back then already? This is my willfulness. If I had to explain again, then—I love Wathes deeply. Being who I am, feeling what I feel... The inevitable conclusion is that I must love Fear-sama deeply no matter what. How should I put this? She is the Wathe of Wathes, the very symbol of Wathes, the existences that are cursed tools. That is what I feel."

"You overestimate her too much, although it's true that the child has suffered an extremely cursed existence."

Taking a deep breath, as if guided by her exhalation, Konoha slowly drew in closer.

"Don't take me lightly either. As a bloodthirsty demon blade—if this were a game, I would most likely be the strongest weapon available, you know?"

"How truly admirable. Then it looks like I must take care of this strongest weapon before I can go assist Aiko... Let me be your opponent. Alice, you stay back."

"Be careful, Abyss. If possible, I hope you won't destroy this important Wathe here."

The wheelchair retreated towards the depths of the corridor. Her wounds from Fear last time were not healed yet, apparently.

"Thank you for your merciful statement. I've decided to learn from your example—Starting tomorrow!"

Lowering her stance, Konoha sprinted as quickly as a sword being drawn from its scabbard.

Given the current circumstances, she should be able to bear the sight of a little bloodshed. By "bloodshed," she meant injuring the opponent. It would be fine so long as she finished things in one fell swoop. If she were to witness unbearable blood, it would only happen with her opponent's decapitation. No problem.

Abyss also stepped forward. As he moved his immense weight, the floor tiles could be heard flying in the corridor. Next came his leather-gloved right fist. Konoha's karate chop, infused with a sword's sharpness, crossed with his punch but was deflected. Abyss continued to step on the floor tiles underfoot. This time, he attacked with his left fist for pure destructive power. Konoha twisted her body to evade, leaving a tiny trail as the tip of her foot brushed past windows, meanwhile performing a spinning kick—

"Heya."

A completely merciless kick aimed for the head was blocked firmly by Abyss' arm. Smiling maliciously, Abyss reached out and tried to grab her leg.

"A woman should not raise her leg so high—Such wonderful skin as white as snow, praise the Lord."

"P-Pervert!"

Konoha jumped and kicked with her other leg. Although it was blocked similarly, she used the reaction force from striking the opponent's arm to withdraw her leg that was almost grabbed and leapt backwards. Separated again by the same distance as earlier, they glared at each other—Only at this moment did the glass windows, which Konoha's foot had brushed past, all shatter at once.

A motionless world.

Only the clear sound of two people staring at each other stood between them.

"...Looks like you're a cross who relies on brawn. Also, you're a pervert. A pervert who relies on brawn, what a truly terrible combination. What should I do now?"

"I am completely self-taught. Hmm, how troubling, my gloves are now tattered. I really liked these gloves."

"A self-taught pervert? That's even worse, the worst of the worst. In the next instant, you won't need to care about any glove anymore."

Konoha suddenly kicked a fire extinguisher in the corridor. Abyss swung his fist and easily struck it down—But due to the small crack Konoha had sliced in it beforehand, the impact caused the fire extinguisher to make a small explosion, scattering white dust and powder everywhere.

Hmm—frowning, Abyss's figure instantly disappeared from sight—

In response to this cloud of smoke, there was a world of difference between being prepared and unprepared.

Konoha instantly closed the distance. Amidst the white smoke, she performed a spear handed strike towards the location of Abyss' head. Although the strike did not penetrate, it did succeed in causing an impact. By sensing his presence, Konoha could tell that Abyss was retreating a few steps backwards.

"This does hurt quite a lot... I've heard that samurai warriors battle openly, fair and square. So I should take this to mean that the weapon did not inherit their spirit?"

"That would depend on the situation. In the case of recovering a loved one's memories, of course some underhandedness would be permitted... So that's that. I'm desperate here, so could you please return them? Haruaki-kun's memories."

"Saying that now won't help anything. Do know that women who keep looking for excuses are not well liked!"

"Can't you say things in a more gentle manner? Well then, let me tell you with my highest level of gentleness—"

Battle instincts throbbing. Body temperature rising. Her face distorting on its own.

This was the instant she had hoped for. Once this man disappeared, everything would be over.

Haruaki-kun would then remember.

A very very important matter, so important that Konoha would go so far as to gamble everything she had upon it.

"—If you have no intention of returning them, I shall shatter that skull of yours to drag the memories out. O Padren Cross!"^[4]

Only for this instant, Konoha's past self overflowed, cruel and merciless. An instant was enough. This was a necessary ritual for her to forget the taboo of killing her own kind.

Obtaining assistance from her past self's murderous intent, Konoha tasked herself to destroying Abyss.

Very quickly, the impacts between fists and karate chops began to overwhelm the sound of the rain.

Part 8

"...Why?"

Hanging her head, the girl did not answer. Her drenched hair not even swaying, she did not answer.

"Why? Why are you doing this? Answer me, Aiko!"

"...Because I want to forget."

She murmured her answer, even softer than the sound of rain.

"Forget what?"

"Forget that I am myself."

Fear frowned but Aiko only continued to stare at the drenched world. She spoke extremely feebly, like a curse:

"...I've sinned, sinning repeatedly all this time. I've killed people for curses. Whether dogs, cats, babies, I've killed all of them to use as curses... The stench of those extinguished lives already pervades my body. That is why animals and babies cry when they realize this fact. I clearly love them so much, but these arms are not even allowed to embrace them. Every time I see them, I am reminded of who I am. I don't want that anymore..."

Fear recalled the incidents of the dog from their first encounter and the baby that Kana had brought.

Aiko was suffering because they disliked her? More correctly, it was the sight of their revulsion that forced her to recognize her past sins, thus resulting in her suffering.

"I've killed people too. Hundreds, thousands. Which is why I'm cursed. I've also suffered whenever I recall those sins. But precisely because of that... I want to lift my curse. For the sake of sinning no further."

"I think... That's not a bad idea. But—I've been wondering. What about during the process? Do I need to carry this sense of guilt all this time? Do I need to live my life while fearing those memories? Every time I see something I want to hug, I am struck by the feeling as though I were pronounced 'unforgivable.' Do I want to lift my curse even if it means experiencing all that?"

Saying that, Aiko shook her head lightly.

"...Too much of a coward. Sorry, I'm too much of a coward. Compared to anything else, compared to lifting my curse in the future, I want to forget my past sins. I want to erase the fact of my past existence."

"That's why you want to rely on Abyss' power? Seeing Haruaki lose his memories, you want to end up the same way!?"

"...If I don't follow their orders, he won't help me. So I must do this. I must do what that man desires..."

"For the sake of forgetting your sins, you'll commit fresh crimes? That's a most contemptible contradiction!"

"...Can't be helped. Besides—"

She paused for a mere instant, only enough to take a deep breath.

Her voice sounding like a prayer as it conveyed her unwavering determination, she continued:

"Besides, in the end... surely... this time's sins, can be forgotten too—"

Splotch—The sound of Aiko leaving footprints in the mud.

Futile—Fear thought to herself. Aiko's wish was futile. She was wrong. Only this, Fear was absolutely certain.

But even if she told Aiko now, Aiko was probably not going to listen.

"Looks like—I'll have to wake you up first."

"It's useless, there's no other way. I've committed sins that cannot be forgiven even if the curse can be lifted—So I must do this, I must do this..."

"I see that you have an unmentionable past, but I can't forgive your for what you're planning to do—Perhaps I'll use a bit of force, so don't go hating on me."

"...I'm the one who needs to apologize. I clearly promised you... The sports festival... To cheer for you..."

"But you did come, right? You arrived as promised."

Fear smiled. But Aiko did not.

She simply stretched out her hand and muttered:

"Indigo Venom No.1, Name: «Unknown». Indigo Venom No.2, Name: «Sakura». Indigo Venom No.3, Name: «Unknown»."

Instantly, several of the many pockets of her coat—the few pockets that were not bulging and filled with pebbles—began to squirm restlessly.

Next, indigo-colored masses flew out from the pockets, instantly expanding and landing before Aiko, turning into the shape of beasts. Dogs. But they were no ordinary dogs.

Despite retaining a form resembling fur, it was as though their bodies were made of indigo-colored metal. Flat but shimmering like a water surface—if one were to ignore the color and the solid texture, it would be similar to the way mercury reflected light. Beneath those eyelids, the beasts' eyeballs were no exception, filled with the indigo mercury-like metal in a hollow manner. Feeling instinctively frightened by those inorganic gazes, Fear—

"Is that your curse?"

"...Indeed."

"Then let me show you mine. In the same way that these things stands as evidence of the people or cats or dogs you've killed, this is the evidence that I've constantly killed people, people, people, people, people, people and more people! Emulation start—Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern», Curse Calling!"

A heavy weight was produced in her hand that was manipulating the Rubik's cube. The rounded steel club fell upon the muddy ground. She felt the mud's soft sensation transmitted through her arm. It felt like smash someone's brain to pulp, a most displeasing reminder.

"This is shamelessly showing off to each other. I guess I can be proud of the fact that there's nothing about these powers to be proud of?"

"...Yes."

As Aiko nodded, each of the three indigo venom beasts ran swiftly on their four legs. They bared rows of sharp and brightly shining teeth that were colored like indigo mercury. Fear swung the spiked club at the closest approaching one.

"Ahhh, I recall the conversation that we had that one time. Seriously—between you and me, who is cursed more?"

"...I don't want to know at all."

"I concur!"

With vigor as though she would obliterate the raindrops from the air as well, Fear swung the heavy weapon.

Part 9

Who knew how many times the spear-handed strikes and the punches had crossed? As the two combatants blocked each other's attacks with one hand, they pulled back their distance simultaneously.

"H-Huff... How's that? Your strength is weakening!"

"The same goes for you—That's what I'd like to say, but your sharpness remains potent as ever. Hmm, despite equality in martial technique, the situation is slightly unfavorable..."

"Then how about you give up? Don't worry, it's not going to hurt."

"Ha! What an incredibly attractive proposal, praise the Lord."

Saying that, Abyss lowered his raised fist. What was he planning? It's not like he'd give up for real—Konoha thought to herself as she gazed forward. Abyss arrogantly adjusted his hat and his necktie.

"...What do you believe exists in hell?"

"What? Asking that kind of question, it's useless if you want to stall for time—"

"I'm not stalling. If you don't want to answer, let me tell you... Darkness exists in hell. Darkness occupied that church which could be called hell. Children screaming and crying, fanatics chanting incantations, terrorists discussing how to topple tyrannical rulers, above their very heads—that space was occupied by dense darkness that even had mass."

Konoha noticed. Something was appearing out of Abyss' fist. At first it resembled a thread but soon enough it became like a rope. Suddenly becoming one with itself, it wrapped his hand like a glove. Konoha could understand without touching it—unlike smoke, that black substance was tangible with solid form.

"I don't understand the principles but I was already able to create this substance once I noticed. Curses are truly complicated and strange things."

Konoha secretly gulped. Was that his secret weapon? But who would be afraid of that kind of thing!?

"A god of darkness? Wow, how cool! That's so incredibly lame! Based on the feeling, I'm certain you're one of those final overlord bosses from games ten years ago."

Finally, borrowing those games from Kuroe to play has proven worthwhile—Konoha thought. Thanks to that, she could now taunt the enemy in this manner.

"I won't refute that so simply. But compared to a sword that can slice things apart, barehanded, I wonder which side is simpler?"

"____!"

Abyss had the thumb of his fist hooked on his pocket. Without any prior warning, the dark matter extended out from his fist and descended towards the floor to trace out a curved trajectory. Konoha could tell from tip's sharp appearance that the darkness had solidified into something like a spear. Rather than blocking it head on, she jumped to evade. The sound of holes being pierced in the concrete could be heard behind her. No time to pay attention to that!

Landing, Konoha intended to close the distance before the enemy could attack again. Just at this moment—The darkness, stabbed into the corridor, began to squirm again. This time, approached like a whip. Konoha had no idea if it could be cut but she had no choice. A swing of her knife hand easily severed it. But at this moment, two new masses of darkness reached out.

"What a hindrance!"

Only able to fight the darkness off with her bare hands, her range of attack was too narrow. Despite gnashing her teeth at this situation, Konoha used both her hands to chop the two masses of darkness. Only at this moment did she realize she could no longer step forward. The first whip of darkness she had severed had somehow lurked underfoot and entangled her ankle. The entangled portion had already solidified. Once ensnared, the darkness could not be severed even by imbuing her foot with sharpness—

(Damn it—!)

She attempted to swing her arms but having her mobility sealed was a critical blow. Although she severed the darkness many times, she lost to their sheer quantity. First her shoulders, then her waist, and finally her arms—Her entire body snared and bound by the whips of darkness, Konoha was suspended in midair.

Her whole body breaking out in cold sweat, Konoha reflexively attacked verbally.

"...You really are a pervert after all. Do you have a fetish for tying girls up?"

"Ara, is that the case, Abyss? If you told me, I'd gladly accept it any time you want."



Bivorio, who had simply been watching with delight, approached slightly on her wheelchair and commented.

"Please don't misunderstand, Alice. You're not a savage like this girl."

Hearing his calm and composed voice, Konoha's anxiety kept increasing in her heart.

Wait, hold on, this... This situation... I'm fine with mutual destruction, but this man must be killed no matter what. Clearly... Clearly that must be done...

Were there any countermeasures? There should be, there must be. Hurry and look for one, make haste, before more darkness reaches out! Before a spear of darkness can pierce this body—

However, she could not come up with a countermeasure.

Within her field of vision, more darkness was approaching mercilessly.

Part 10

With the «Morgenstern» half-buried in the mud, lifting it would be such a hassle.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

The tip of the blade remained buried in the ground. Fear drew it out with a twist of her hip and a sideways swinging motion. An indigo beast was flying towards her with bared fangs. Fear felt a sensation as though she were chopping down a massive tree. The neck's severed surface also looked like the same old indigo-colored mercury. Without shedding a drop of blood, the indigo venom disappeared. How many beasts was this already? Whatever!

There was another one behind her. There was not even enough time to turn around and swing the axe.

"...«Human-Perforator», Curse Calling!"

Passing under her armpit, the drill penetrated the mouth of the beast behind her. But immediately, more indigo venom appeared as though it were overlapping the outline of the previous one. A short-legged corgi. Fear recalled the puppy she had embraced during the first encounter with

Aiko. No, it can't be, it's definitely not... No way... It can't. Just as she was thinking that, the beast jumped over the indigo venom corpse whose head was where the drill was embedded—

(Damn it... There are too many of them! But I'm doing this manually!)

"Mechanism No.3 severance type, descending form: «Guillotine»!"

The transformation and the descending blade made it just in time. The beast's body was sliced into front and back halves. Using front claws of indigo venom that could not possibly reach that far if it still belonged to the original dog's short limbs, the front half jumped past her face and flew behind her.

Feeling the intense throbbing of her own pulse, Fear surveyed her surroundings. There were no more.

"Huff... Okay... Next, then—"

However, Fear then heard a voice that was creating more fatigue for her—

"Indigo Venom No.13, Name: «Pumpkin». Indigo Venom No.14, Name: «Unknown». Indigo Venom No.15, Name: «Unknown». Indigo Venom No.16, Name: «Umekichi». Indigo Venom No.17, Name: ...«Kousuke»."

The last indigo venom familiar was not a dog but something resembling a crawling baby. A creature, colored in that terrifying metallic indigo, brandishing sharp claws the original was not supposed to possess, was crawling towards Fear.

"Guh..."

"...There are plenty more, so just give up..."

Seeing Fear transform the guillotine back to the drill, Aiko murmured.

Fear gripped the solid steel hard. More? How many more did Aiko have? Fear had fought desperately to defeat each and every one of them so far, but the last situation was really dangerous. If Aiko were to continue increasing their numbers, who knew what was going to happen—

"...Let me pass. If you let me pass, I'll leave you alone. They don't want to kill you."

"Ha! Because that woman wants me, right? But if you tell her that 'she hindered me until the very end, it couldn't be helped,' I'm sure she'll forgive you! Don't worry."

"Why are you trying so hard?"

"Once you go to school as well, you'll understand."

Indeed, no matter how tough it was, Fear was not going to retreat from here. Behind her was everyone. Her classmates, Kirika, Kana, Taizou, Shiraho, Sovereignty—as well as Haruaki.

Fear gripped the drill's handle even harder. Aiko's shoulders shook as she sighed.

Using this as the signal, all the present indigo venom familiars rushed forward together.

Fear understood her situation in despair. One. She could easily kill one beast, but what about afterwards? She did not want to imagine. Hence, she simply bit her lip hard and raised her trembling arm—Then it happened.

Rebelling against Fear's will, her own body jumped high into the air.

Part 11

The rain continued nonstop. The lunch break had already passed. The announcer had just proclaimed that the afternoon events were postponed for now.

The students' tent where Haruaki was staying was packed full of students. Starting a while ago, the same meaningless dialogue repeated again and again—I'm getting drenched, squeeze it further, it can't be helped... etc etc. Naturally, everyone was forced to stand helplessly. It was evocative of passengers packed like sardines in trains. So stifling. Furthermore, Haruaki was facing the additional hardship of people staring at what was above his head.

"Ahhh, damn it... This is really the worst."

"Sorry Haru. If I stayed down there, I'll surely get crushed."

Riding on Haruaki's shoulders, dressed like a cheerleader, Kuroe answered blankly. The pompoms that tickled his head occasionally were unimaginably annoying.

Naturally, this situation did not arise from Haruaki's volition. Back when the tent was starting to get crowded, Kuroe had climbed onto him on her own accord. Then instantly, the packed train passengers state resulted and Haruaki could no longer let her down even if he wanted to.

"Say, why did you run over to the students' tent... Even if the girls asked you to..."

"If I'm not by your side, I won't be able to do anything if something unexpected happens, right?"

Arching her back, Kuroe lowered her face upside down in front of Haruaki's view as she murmured. Haruaki could feel something pressing on the back of his head. The sensation was quite warm. Trying hard not to think about it, he said:

"But anyway, this is really taking a while."

"So slow."

Haruaki directed his gaze towards the entrance of the tent in front that was used as the changing room. Kana had poked her head out a couple times to survey the surroundings. Worried about whether the rain would stop—It must be more than that.

"I have a bad feeling."

"Hmm?"

"A bad feeling. Although there's no basis, I have this kind of feeling..."

"To be frank—it's not like I don't have that feeling either."

In that case—

"Could you go over to them? I should be fine here."

"Even if you say that... I was asked to protect you, Haru. If something were to happen in spite of your 'should be fine'..."

"On the other hand, this time I'm begging you to go over to them—I'll do anything in return. If they scold you, I'll defend you. If you ask me to do

anything next time, I promise to do it. Look at this situation here, nothing can possibly happen."

Kuroe's blank gaze dropped down in front of Haruaki again. Perhaps he was imagining things... But it felt as though her gaze contained slight shades of surprise.

"Why would you go that far?"

"Why... Isn't it obvious?"

Having said that, he could not articulate a reason instantly. For "his current self," the girls were merely strangers he had met only yesterday. He did not understand. He had no impression at all.

Ahhh, however, however...

The gazes they cast towards him, the words they said to him, all that was telling him that he was dear to them. Hence, for himself, they too, must be—

"...Because they are very dear to me."

Somehow, saying this felt very embarrassing. Haruaki turned his face away after finishing his sentence. This resulted in Kuroe's thighs clamping down tightly on his cheeks. With the supple thighs pressed hard against his face, Kuroe could feel the pulsation of Kuroe's arteries from an unusual place.

"Puuhah... Hey!"

But she was not doing this to toy with Haruaki. Kuroe lifted her knees from her sitting posture and nimbly stood up on Haruaki's shoulders. Looking up, Haruaki found himself staring straight at the bottom of her athletic bloomers, making him at a loss on what to do. Those are not panties, don't mind them! But it's not like I can keep staring, right? Why am I embarrassed? Damn it! Now is not the time to be thinking of these things! Just ignore them in any case! —Instantly, he ended the conference in his mind.

"Are you willing to go?"

"Because you asked me, Haru. So, I'm off~"

Answering in her blank tone of voice that was excessively relaxed, Kuroe used Haruaki's shoulders as a springboard and took a leap. Flying over the students' heads, her jump instantly landed her outside of the tent. As the patter of footsteps receded in the distance, Haruaki sighed for two reasons.

First of all, Kuroe had left two clear footprints on the shoulders of his gym clothes.

"Ha~ruakki-kuun? Can you explain this~? Of course, what we want to investigate is the 'Cheerleader Beauty Sitting on Your Shoulders Incident' that just happened~!"

The other reason was the fact that the surrounding students were grabbing him by the arm, their eyes staring with murderous intent.

Part 12

New darkness appeared. That mass of darkness flew straight towards—Bivorio.

"...Eh?"

Just as Konoha blinked, Abyss clicked his tongue and stretched his darkness in Bivorio's direction. Consequently, the darkness restraining Konoha lost density and she was able to seize the opportunity and escape by chopping with her hand.

"Hmm~ Looks like it won't work that easily... I declare 'The Hostage' plan a failure."

"...Kuroe-san!"

As Abyss' darkness approached, the black hair retracted back outside the window with a "whoosh." Crouching in a tree next to the school building was a girl dressed as a cheerleader. Expressionlessly and blankly, she raised her hand:

"Hi."

"What are you going 'Hi' for!? Didn't we ask you to protect Haruaki-kun!?"

"Haru himself asked me to come here. He said he had a bad feeling. And in actual fact, you were in a crisis, right?"

"Umm... Umm... That's true..."

Konoha turned her gaze towards the corridor. A new enemy huh? —Abyss smiled wryly as he bid Bivorio to retreat again.

Resting her face on her hands, Kuroe spoke as though she were dumbfounded:

"This really isn't like you, Kono-san. If you calm down and think, surely you'll instantly figure out the countermeasures for achieving a breakthrough in this situation. But because you're not calm it ended up like this. Would you like me to teach you?"

"But I'm very calm... Anyway, what countermeasures for achieving a breakthrough? Just tell me."

"Well then, please touch my hair first. I'm extending it over now."

"Oh? Then what? What does this have to do with any countermeasures at aaaall—?"

The instant she clutched the hair, Kuroe's hair wrapped around her wrist—Then pulling hard, Konoha flew out of the window with "whoosh."

"K-Kuroe-san!"

"I didn't deceive you. This is the countermeasure for achieving a breakthrough. Also, the one down there is coming up."

In midair, Konoha discovered that while she was thrown out of the window, someone else was flying up from downstairs, wrapped in hair—

"Uwah? Hey, Kuroe, what the heck are you doing?"

Fear was tossed back into the corridor window that Konoha had just exited.

Adjusting to the rain, Konoha narrowed her eyes and looked up at the tree, only to see Kuroe commenting nonchalantly:

"I understand how you cannot forgive the guy who stole Haru's memories, but there's the concept of combat compatibility, Kono-san."

"..."

"Kono-san, your opponent is over there. I will cheer for you as appropriate from here—Because I don't want to get bitten in the ass by a dog. That said, I have no confidence in dodging attacks from a guy who relies on brawn."

Now you're really acting like a model cheerleader—Konoha sighed as she looked around.

Amidst the rain, innumerable indigo shapes were standing. She sensed the presence of repulsive beasts.

"It's not like I have experience in eradicating pests, right?"

"At least you're more experienced than Ficchi in stalemate battles, right? Like the Battle of Sekigahara or the Siege of Osaka. Didn't you mention them before?"

"Mentioning all that old stuff again..."

I see—Konoha understood in a partially appalled manner. In a certain sense, she was indeed able to handle this sort of enemy more decisively than Fear.

"...I understand. In any case, I'll complain later to you about running over here on your own."

"I'm not afraid of your complaining. Haru said he'll defend me and even promised to fulfill any request from me! I'm gonna ask him to scrub my back in the bath~"

Smiling wryly, Konoha swung her knife hand to get rid of the raindrops. Under this heavy rain, the action was meaningless of course, but it was a matter of mood.

Konoha turned around to find the center of the indigo presences—the figure of the standing girl, giving off an aura that almost seemed to meld into the mist. She was slowly approaching.

Konoha also began to make her way forward steadily.

She did not forget to ask Kuroe a final important question:

"—That «Right to Have Haruaki-kun Undertake Any Kind of Request», how much are you willing to sell it for?"

Chapter 5 - The Contents Inside? / "Not void"

Part 1

The corridor was unrecognizable, with tiles peeled off, holes opened up in the concrete beneath, windows shattered, fluorescent tubes on the ceiling broken as well. One could easily imagine the intensity of the fight up to this point.

But henceforth, this was to become her own stage.

"...«Narrow Narrow Abyss». Haha, I'm so happy."

"Oh?"

"Ara ara, how popular you are, Abyss. I'm feeling a little envious."

Bivorio commented as she observed from behind Abyss. Fear slightly forced herself to ignore it.

"Looks like the moment has finally arrived to retrieve Haruaki's memories."

"That's what the Japanese sword was saying as well... Is that human really that important? Perhaps it might be strange for me to ask, being the one who asked him to make his confession, but are his memories so important that you'll go this far to retrieve them?"

"Of course!"

Abyss' hat swayed to the side as though he were dumbfounded by an ignorant child.

"Is that really so? Perhaps I've mentioned before—My true nature is to bring salvation to mankind. Because that's what God and the cross that symbolizes God are about. That boy may very well have obtained salvation from me. I've heard from Aiko that he has forgotten everything related to Wathes, yes?"

"What—"

Fear stopped herself midway in her retort. She recalled Haruaki's mutterings to himself that night in the kitchen.

"Judging from the way you look, you must have considered it before, right? Asking humans to help lift curses... That is doubly ridiculous. For we who

are non-human, surpassing humans, why would we intentionally lose the proof of our status? It is not only futile but also non-beneficial. And for an ordinary human to assist in this futile and non-beneficial endeavor—Ahhh, who knows how much suffering and trouble he has gone through to this date?"

"...Shut up."

"Since it causes suffering and offers no benefit, it's better that he stops doing that sort of thing. I have saved him from his tormented life! Asking him to confess his burden, having him forget about it. Isn't there no need to force his memories to return?"

"Shut up!"

Despite her anger, Fear did not hesitate.

"He wishes to recover his memories! Rather than torment, those memories are very important to him!"

She believed so without a doubt, because on that particular night, that was what Haruaki actually said—

"...You weren't taking away Haruaki's memories of cursed tools on purpose, right? Rather, you intended to steal all his memories. It's just that I interrupted you so it ended up with that result, right? Perhaps you may think it happened by chance, but I don't believe so."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"I think that for Haruaki, those memories occupy a great majority of his mind. Which is why he forgot those memories—That is what I believe!"

"That's your own forced interpretation. Perhaps compared to anything else, that is the burden he wishes to forget the most. In actual fact, that boy should become quite depressed to remember them... Given such a rare chance to forget them."

"Shut up, I've already said it three times, «Narrow Narrow Abyss». You're the absolute worst. I'm going to shut that mouth of yours and break it!"

Turning her Rubik's cube into the «Morgenstern», Fear closed in. Abyss also stepped forward, swinging his fist using his body weight. How foolish, no matter how hard your fist may be, you can't possibly surpass this execution tool, designed for bludgeoning and specially treated in quality.

As expected, the «Morgenstern» overcame the fist and sent Abyss reeling backwards, falling on one knee. Fear charged further forwards.

"Here I am, barehanded and unarmed, yet you still show no mercy. Truly, praise the Lord. Then you shall behold the darkness that dwells in the narrow, narrow abyss of hell!"

"Muu!?"

A blackness was emitted from his glove like smoke or mist. The mist instantly took on tangible form and extended into three spears.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»—Curse Calling!"

Using the long and massive axe, Fear swept the three spears away all at once. The spears' tips dispersed hazily into mist, but the root portion attached to Abyss' glove showed warning signs of restlessness.

Immediately—

"I see, you're harder to handle than the Japanese sword. But let us see how long can you endure!"

Several new spears and whips appeared, displaying hardness and softness. Abyss stood his ground in front of Bivorio's wheelchair, occasionally casting his gaze outside the window. He was apparently on guard in case of Kuroe's actions.

(He was just playing around with those moves just now. Is he planning on a long range attack from over there next?)

What should she do? The answer came instantly. A path needed to be opened for closing their distance. Even if for just an instant, if only this hindering darkness could be swept clean—

—Can it be done?

—It can be done.

Because she knew all about the castle lord's madness.

"Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»!"

She launched the execution stake, striking the floor of the corridor in front of Abyss, without penetrating any of the spears of darkness. But this was enough—That was merely a set up.

She had intended to settle the battle before retrieving the stake, but Abyss' darkness was reaching out for her, moving past the stake's position. At this moment, Fear transmitted her vigorous will to the stake through the chain of cubes that was connected to it.

"Mechanism No.12 extinction type, revolving blade form: «Tornado of Souls», Curse Calling!"

Instantly, the stake transformed into a stout and upright pillar. Extending out from that pillar were countless blades of varying lengths. Then with the grating sound of gears as a signal, the blades started revolving around the pillar like a tornado—Abyss' tentacles of darkness were haphazardly swept up and sliced apart.

The tornado of blades left claw marks on the classroom walls and caused fatal damage to the glass windows that were already on the verge of destruction. In terms of results, the tornado of blades held absolute control of air supremacy within its domain, imposing its tyranny on the space known as the corridor.

"This—what is it?"

"Haha, this reminds me of the time when three people gathered around me to play catch! Of course, the ball was a human with his arms and legs tied up. With just the slightest deviation or unsteadiness in the ball's trajectory, the result was slices, slices, slices of flesh! When members from a family of seven were used one after another as the ball, the atmosphere was the liveliest!"

Fear had no idea how much of an effect her words might produce, but any intimidation would be better than none—So she loudly yelled out memories she had no wish of recalling at all. She also remembered how the final remaining prisoner girl had fallen into despair and insanity and thrown herself into the blades at the first instant, but there was no need to waste time explaining that to Abyss.

Fear sprinted swiftly and stopped the tornado with perfect timing. Grabbing it and transforming it back to the «Morgenstern», she swept away the darkness blocking her path. Before Abyss could produce new darkness,

Fear had already closed the distance in his unguarded state, swinging the supermassive murder weapon—

Then darkness erupted explosively, overflowing in a manner incomparable to before.

"Wha—!"

Fear was blown back along the corridor. Performing a back flip and landing on all fours, she looked up to see—

A cross.

Wielded by Bivorio while sitting on her wheelchair—A cross.

"...How troubling. Can't I defeat my opponent without using this form..."

"Conversely, you can win in this form, right?"

"Hmph... I get it now. Transforming back into your original form allows you to control greater amounts of darkness, am I right? If you weren't stingy with it, you could have done this from the start, right?"

Fear stood up. She had suffered no injuries of note and could still fight.

"But I don't think the situation is that favorable for you. Changed into that form, you can no longer move. In other words, you've lost the ability to dodge."

Instead of Abyss, Bivorio was the one who answered her.

"Then as the one holding him, I shall move in his stead. Just watching from the sidelines is getting boring."

She slowly stood up from the wheelchair. Her earlier wounds yet to heal completely, her footsteps were unsteady and the pain distorted her expression from time to time. This was hardly surprising, seeing as Fear had pierced quite a few holes in her abdomen last time.

However, Bivorio smiled at the cross.

"Would you do the honors, Abyss?"

"As much as I would like to avoid straining your body excessively, it can't be helped."

As soon as Abyss' words finished, the darkness surrounding the cross began to writhe—and tore up Bivorio's clothing.

The sight of her nude body was composed with the colors of gold and pure white. Wrapped around her abdomen, the bandages were also pure white. But with one exception, a single part of her body displayed a different color—that of indigo mercury. Indeed, on her right arm, which had been covered by the opera glove until now, everything below the elbow had turned into the same substance as gu poison—

"Indeed, this is Aiko-sama's curse. Causing the owner to venomize... Perhaps because she is currently producing gu poison continuously, the venomizing process is advancing rapidly."

"You're... willing to go that far?"

"We affirm curses absolutely. As the head of the organization serving as the role model, this is only natural. Were this to continue, I suppose I shall turn entirely into venom at some point? But if it allows me to serve as her foundation, I will be even more ecstatic. That said, the one fact that I shall have to part with Abyss does sadden me greatly."

"You're insane!"

Bivorio chuckled in response. The darkness writhed further and reached for Bivorio's nude body, instantly solidifying and covering her—

The darkness served as black clothing, black bandages, a black corset, as well as black armor. Despite the difference in form, it was still a nun's habit—Her previous attire. This stood as proof of her identity as the priestess serving the fake god Abyss.

"Ahhh—This feels much better, thank you."

"That's because you keep moving around despite the plaster cast. Once this ends, you do know you'll be in pain, right?"

"That is pain that ought to be loved."

"Heyaaaah!"

Fear had no intention of listening to them finish their sickening conversation. She instantly closed the distance and swung the spiked metal club—But did not feel the sensation of impact. Hastily, she turned her head.

Bivorio was suspended in midair. As though she were riding on the back of a bicycle, she was sitting sideways on Abyss with her knees drawn up.

"Wha... Flying..."

"Hahaha! As God, how could something as simple as flying pose a challenge!?"

By spewing out darkness below it, the cross was apparently using the reaction force to hover in the air. Fear recalled what had happened at the river embankment.

"I get it now. That time when I found Haruaki, you used this method to fly and escape, right?"

"Despite looking like something to be proud of, this actually does not go beyond the level of a circus act, given its poor energy efficiency... Very well."

Bivorio and Abyss landed lightly in the corridor again. Bivorio lifted Abyss effortlessly. Although her stance was similar to how she held the Cannibal Cooker last time, this is actually the cross she wielded originally. Naturally, there were no openings to exploit.

"Now that things have reached this point, let me ask you once again, Fear-sama. Will you join us at the Bivorio Family—"

"So annoying!"

Fear closed in again and smashed the spiked metal club downwards. The cross was swung to oppose her—But just before contact was made, darkness flowed out from the cross, deflecting the metal ball easily like a shield. It felt like hammering a heavy slab of rock. Taking advantage of Fear's staggering back, the cross reached out with tentacles of darkness—

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

Hastily retreating, Fear used the axe to slash the dark tentacles. Without letting up, Bivorio swung the cross down from overhead—Blocked. Swing. Dodge. Transformation. Darkness. Saturation. Retreat. Transformation. Tornado slash. Transformation. Advance. Re-engage.

"...Fear-sama, would you please give up? It feels like this scene should be titled 'The End Draws Near With Darkness.'"

"That's what... I want... to say to you!"

Fear moved her body, fully absorbed in the fight. At the same time, she sensed—Somewhere in a corner of her mind, there was something rousing in excitement. Was it the thrill of battle? Perhaps. The thrill of bloodlust? No. Regarding the 'no,' this was not excitement from actions undertaken with bloodlust. Despite using her various forms in an unprecedented manner—those tools of torture and execution, Fear was standing somewhere quite far removed from her past. Even she knew that very well.

Her goal was not harming people.

She was swinging this weapon, only because—only because.

To save the existence behind her, to save a certain person.

Hence, she must not lose—Fear thought strongly to herself. No, she should amend this statement. Something simpler, something more powerful. This must be the true face of her excitement.

(—I cannot possibly lose!)

Until this resolve crushed the cross, Fear shall not halt the movements of her hand.

Part 2

There were no groans, not even the sound of breathing. Resembling living creatures but not living, appearing to be metal but not metal. This was Tateoka Aiko's gu poison—Indigo Venom.

But there should not be any problem. Under normal conditions, it might be more difficult to sense their presence. But since it was currently raining, nothing could face the splattering of raindrops without making a sound.

Hence, with a thrust, Konoha killed the quietly approaching indigo venom baby. It would have been better were it simply a strange indigo metallic shape rather than a baby—Konoha could only pray that Aiko did not harbor too many venom familiars of this type. Konoha's displeased anxiety intensified.

"...You too... will obstruct me?"

"Yes, how could I possibly not obstruct you? I cannot believe that you are going to kill everyone within the school. However, I still don't understand how that would allow you to create gu poison."

"...Due to my curse progressing to a point that allowed me to take on human form, my nature changed as a result. The essence of gu poison is that within a sealed territory, the losers' lives become the winner's nourishment. Provided I seal off a venue personally, that space is then considered a vessel called 'me.' Of course, physical methods can be used to escape to some extent—But this space called a school is already sealed off conceptually and has become 'me'..."

"So all you need to do is kill everyone here and all their lives will become the possessions of you, the winner? I see, I understand now. So the remaining question is: why would you do this on Bivorio's orders—"

Just at this moment, all the glass windows shattered on the third floor corridor, the place where Konoha had been until just now. This was probably the result of a certain energetic person using some kind of ridiculous torture tool? Hearing shards of glass falling on the muddy ground behind her, Konoha sighed.

"However, that child is going to complain if I stand here leisurely, so I'll take my time interrogating you after I stop you."

"...Really? Sorry, sorry, you treated me with such gentleness... Your food was wonderful... But I must do this, I must do this no matter what..."

Konoha did not feel displeased to hear her cooking being praised. Smiling cordially, she answered:

"Thank you. But I'll feel troubled if you get the wrong idea, so let me state for the record—I will definitely not be any more gentle than Fear-san! Especially now."

"Eh..."

"Ahhh, I can probably imagine. That child must have defeated your familiars fair and square, one by one? What a truly foolish child. The enemy numbers are admittedly great, but there's always a solution, yes?"

Saying that, Konoha advanced. Aiko gasped in surprise. With a wave of her hand, the venom familiars all rushed forward.

Konoha first aimed and chopped with her hand. Despite the hardness, she still managed to slice its head into two. Without even looking at her handiwork, Konoha took a few steps back—After pausing half a second, she swung her hand while taking a step back at the same time. In the corner of her eye, two venom familiar had crashed into each other, having lost their target. Using the few seconds of respite thus obtained, she allowed one beast to rush forward. Then carefully calculating the angle, she punched it flying with the back of her hand... Naturally, its flying body also hindered the movements of the other venom familiars.

"How should I describe this? ...The trick is to maintain a wide field of view and use imagination, how's that?"

There was no need to overreach in slaying the enemies. All she needed to do was seize appropriate opportunities.

"Seriously... It's quite an unpleasant feeling for me to reuse my memories of the battlefield. Ah, this does remind me of one matter. Didn't I mention in the beginning that you had a smell that caused agitation in the depths of my heart? Were you ever owned by anyone related to the Tokugawa? I remember there was this man from Iga whose family name was Tateoka..."

"...It's possible."

Hearing her answer, Konoha smiled gently.

"For some reason, my true nature causes me to automatically fight harder against those related to the Tokugawa. Although I wish to show mercy, I might end up becoming even less gentle, so please do take care!"

"...! Indigo Venom No.23, Name: «Unknown»! Indigo Venom No.24—"

New venom familiars appeared, splashing in the mud.

Konoha smiled faintly again and leapt into the fray of the nostalgic battlefield.

Part 3

She did not hesitate at all. Henceforth, all she needed to do was rush over to her family and fulfill her duties.

Nevertheless—

The scene she encountered first thing at the school caused turmoil in her heart once more.

It seemed as if the entire world had been turned upside down.

Once inhaled, the air seemed to turn into lukewarm body fluids.

Dissonance.

Flying over the school walls, she landed. This was her first experience in the ten-odd years she had lived. The roots of the tall trees planted next to the walls. The ground that had turned into mud. Having landed on her knees, she looked straight forward and prepared to stand up, at this moment—

She saw it again.

Dog-like things were being slaughtered one after another.

Throb. How many times had she felt this way recently? The sense of dissonance penetrated her brain.

Kururi vomited. Digestive juices mixed itself into the mud. Clutching the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth», her hand trembled. She supported herself with both hands against the ground.

Squealing was heard. She heard squealing.

Impossible. Those indigo-colored dogs could not possibly squeal. However, she heard it.

Then what exactly was making the noises she was hearing?

"Huff... Ah... Hah—I'm... so strange... gone mad...? U-Urggggghhh...!"

Within her distorted field of view, she saw Aiko summon even more venom familiars. Throb. Those were the three dogs Abyss had caught for confirming Aiko's powers. Despite the indigo mercury appearance, she could tell from their physiques and the shape of their ears. The Norwich Terrier, the American Cocker Spaniel and the Schipperke. Eh? Why do I know the names of so many types of dogs? Why can I identify them so accurately? Do I know a lot about dogs? Throb. Throb. I clearly never had—never had—never—

Nikaidou Yutaka.

She had kept a pet dog once.

Her chest felt as though it would expand and burst from the throbbing. The dizziness felt as though her skull was going to explode. The sense of vomiting was scorching her throat. Throb.

The mixture of stomach juices and muddy water was reflecting something. Yutaka. Waiting for Kururi who had survived the suicide, the dog had barked many times at her uncle. She recalled the large build of the elderly dog. It had died. Amidst a puddle the color of ripe strawberries, its life had extinguished. Throat slashed, its fur curled up along its wounds, its flesh twitching and restless, its limbs convulsing as though suffering from the difficulty in breathing—And looking down at the dog was a certain person, holding the "<"-shaped knife—

"...Huff... A-Ahhh!"

She touched something dirty. The hand that realized that fact dropped the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth». A splash of muddy water. The knife that was supposed to have given her courage, the knife that helped her kill her uncle—The knife that continued to act, fueled by bloodthirst. What the knife had stabbed into was the warm fur that had comforted her tears many times in the past.

The knife, buried deep into the last family member that had remained steadfastly loyal unto death.

She remembered, remembered, remembered, remembered, remembered this incident.

At the same time, it struck her. Why had she forgotten this? How could she have forgotten—

Finding herself sprawled over her own vomit, Kururi slowly raised her head. Everything had been taken away. There was nothing left in her petite body. Her asymmetric hair dangled, weighted by the rainwater it had absorbed, covering the petite girl's expression. Nothingness. HOLLOWNESS.

Her hollow lips, having even lost their trembling, moved slightly:

"...Liar..."

To whom was this word directed to? No one knew. Including everyone not present, the rain, the vomit, the knife with the bent design, the drenched hair, the sound of splashing water from the distant fighting, Nikaidou Yutaka.

No one—knew at all.

Part 4

Fear decided that the greatest issue was the darkness' buffering property. No matter how many times she struck with her weapons, the formless shield protected the cross. The problem boiled down to how to penetrate that line of defense.

The «Morgenstern»'s impacts were being deflected. «A Hatchet of Lingchi»'s blade was not working. The «Human-Perforator» only brought a disappointing sensation to her hand. Indeed, what she needed was penetrative power. Pure sharpness.

Did she possess that kind of torture and execution tool?

—Of course.

Fear answered her own question. She drew back and distanced herself from Bivorio. To get a running start.

Casually deflecting the sudden spears of darkness that shot at her, Fear glared at the cross and declared:

"I will destroy you, «Narrow Narrow Abyss»!"

"Isn't that a bit late to declare? ...Are you going that far even though we are clearly kindred, Fear-in-Cube?"

"Precisely because we are kindred! Your way of living is wrong, hence as kindred, I will destroy you to make things right."

"The way we see it—" "Your way of living is the one that's wrong."

Bivorio smiled wryly and Abyss did the same.

"Then how about you ask that gloomy darkness of yours and my sadism!? To see which side's cursed hatred is correct!"

While realizing the duel was reaching a climax, Fear sprinted along the corridor in a forward leaning posture. She sprinted singlemindedly. As the darkness hurtled towards her, she merely dodged with a slight turn of her face. Despite the feeling of a lashing cut on her cheek, she did not stop. Before the darkness could turn into whips to entangle her, Fear sprinted even faster. Using the momentum of her speed, she lightly lifted the Rubik's cube that was emulating her form—

"Mechanism No.30 blooming type, pointed form: «Flower Sword Verazella», Curse Calling!"

What manifested was a long and slender sword that resembled a spear. Particularly striking was its characteristic tip—The sword's pinnacle ended in a sharp point while the top ten-odd centimeters of the sword was shaped like a water droplet, or perhaps one should describe it as an egg's curvature. It seemed to refute the purpose of a sword's long and straight blade.

Aiming the sword's tip towards Abyss and Bivorio, Fear continued to sprint, sprint and sprint. The spears of darkness brushed past her shoulders and passed through her hair, but did not pose any reason for her to stop. Sprint—just run forward, full speed ahead!

"A suicide attack? Praise the Lord!"

"Abyss—Here goes!"

Fear closed in successfully. Bivorio swung the giant cross.

"—Nuaaaaah!"

Fear mustered all her might and entrusted everything to the momentum of her sprint, making a thrust with the raised spear. The two weapons clashed intensely. Similar to all previous clashes until now, the impact was blocked by the darkness appearing in front of the cross—No.

This was different from before.

Fear pushed hard. Pouring forth the strength from her entire body, she pushed forward. She could feel through her hand the sensation of gradually penetrating the darkness. How's that—

"Abyss!"

"Hmm..."

"Ga... ah... ah...!"

Slowly and steadily, the tip of the spear-sword invaded the depths of the darkness.

A contest of strength without any technique. Gambling purely on penetrative power.

Because this was what Fear prayed for. Praying, praying, she continued to push forward with all her might.

Is it there yet? Is it there yet? Is it there yet—

Part 5

At this very moment, Konoha also halted her movements. The venom familiars continued to be born.

"Indigo Venom No.32, Name: «Unknown». Indigo Venom No.33, Name: «Tama». Indigo Venom No.34, Name: «Gregory». Indigo Venom No.35—"

Just as Konoha was thinking "It's about time to put an end to this," Aiko apparently came to the same conclusion of deciding the battle all at once. Pulling back, she continued to recite to herself.

(In any case, these numbers are truly...)

There were currently close to ten of them. Konoha did have battlefield experience, but those opponents were humans after all and were limited in how many could attack at once. But small-sized venom familiars could easily surpass those limits. Suddenly, Konoha recalled the time when Sovereignty's dolls attacked—They were quite numerous that time and really tough to handle.

"Indigo Venom No.36, Name: «Unknown». Indigo Venom No.37, Name:..."

For some reason, Aiko began to stutter this instant as though she were hesitating or perhaps troubled by something.

However, she still held her breath and continued as though she had resigned herself:

"Name—«Heinzmann Diemelgerg»!"

This time, a person appeared from her summons. Not a baby but an adult male. In spite of her surprise, Konoha suppressed her feelings.

She had already considered the possibility beforehand. Since they were targeting everyone in school, then the creation of gu poison was not limited to cats, dogs or babies. Using mostly cats and dogs up until now probably stemmed from the curse's usage efficiency and ease of control. Now that Aiko had started using a venom familiar of human form, it must be because the owner had gone mad and no longer cared about cost-effectiveness, that could only be it—

Having given birth to the blue metallic man, Aiko panted, her shoulders shaking heavily.

"...These are... all of them."

"Oh? Really? How do you plan on using them?"

"Like this."

The venom familiars swarmed in. Their numbers were so great that trying to calculate them would be a feat of strength that would slow one down.

Readying her battle stance, Konoha frowned and thought to herself:

(I can dodge them. I can evade them. But that alone won't end this—!)

—It would be bad if she made a move but ended up getting in the way. Hence, she had simply observed quietly until now.

But it finally came, the time to provide assistance.

Thinking that to herself, still on the tree, Kuroe murmured softly to herself:

"Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori» and «Penetrator Yoshimasa»."

Konoha did not take action. The venom familiars closed in from all directions.

Not moving an inch from her position, her figure disappeared into the indigo avalanche.

But at this moment, Aiko could sense a troubling presence through the indigo venom.

"...?"

Just as Aiko felt perplexed, black hair was silently extending from a nearby tree, swiftly picking up a certain object from the center of the venom familiars and tossing it over towards Aiko. The object was a Japanese sword, sheathed in a black scabbard—

"!"

In the instant of Aiko's surprise, the Japanese sword turned back into human form again. Glaring sharply, Konoha grabbed Aiko by the neck and lifted her up.

"It's over. When facing an army of overwhelming numbers, capturing the general is of utmost priority. Easier said than done, of course."

"O-Ooh..."

"Are you listening? Whatever, it doesn't matter anyway—Just surrender. In any case, make all the gu poison disappear first."

No—Aiko shook her head, prompting Konoha's face to draw near. Beneath those glasses, her pupils contracted, becoming eerily like a cat's—

"Thou shalt do well to act whilst my tone of voice remaineth gentle, venomous pot. Ancient relic reeking of Tokugawa stench, were I my past self I would have choked thee to death on the spot. Before I change my mind... Make haste and do as I say!"

No good, I can't win. There's no way to win against this person. Aiko instinctively understood.

The force strangling her throat intensified, almost preventing her from breathing. On the verge of suffocation, Aiko nodded desperately. Her mind in a daze, she withdrew the venom familiars back into her pockets. Only then did the pressure on her throat begin to ease.

"I've been really terrible today. Perhaps due to a loss of composure, I've been speaking in a rather crude manner... I must reflect properly on myself."

"...Sob... Cough... Cough cough..."

Konoha loosened her grip and Aiko fell onto the ground. So much pain. So terrifying. Failure. I clearly had no choice but to do it. Her mind could only

struggle as she crawled on the cold and muddy ground. Did the rain get heavier? Or was it lighter now? Ahhh, it's lighter. Feeling moisture on her face, mistaking it for heavier rain, that was due to her tears. An unending stream of tears.

"Sob... Sob sob..."

She could see someone's feet before her. Were they that terrifying person's feet? Since they had become enemies, since she had lost, naturally, only a fate of destruction awaited her, right?

Aiko looked up in trepidation.

Standing there was not Konoha with her demonic expression.

"Ahhh... Why?"

Instead, it was a boy with an extremely troubled expression, looking too kind for his own good.

Shaking his head, sighing mournfully, he knelt down in front of Aiko.

"I still can't remember. I still can't recall any of this. Who you are, why things became like this, everything is so confusing. However..."

"I don't know why... But seeing your crying face, I get the feeling that this would make things better."

Saying that, he stuffed his hand lightly into one of Aiko's pockets.

"Uh... Let's leave it at that for now. Umm, if this constitutes sexual harassment for you, let me apologize beforehand."

The feeling of the hand in her pocket.

The embarrassed smile as he scratched his face.

The tears that continued to slide down her face.

Faced with all this, Aiko thought to herself.

Recalling those tears she had thought to be her last, back when she resolved to freeze her heart and never weep again, she thought to herself, at a loss:

Oh no—It's no good.

It's melting.

Part 6

Is it there yet!? Not yet!?

Strength gradually faded from her hands that were thrusting the sword of petals forward. All the muscles in her entire body were screaming in pain.

Ominous anxiety was beginning to fill up her heart. Not good. If this... continued... Then—

At this moment, a black object entered the corner of her view. It had reached in from outside the window, a bundle of hair that had hardened into a spear. Fear merely swiveled her eyeballs to confirm. She saw Kuroe on the tree, observing both the situations in the corridor and down below the tree—apparently using half of her hair skillfully to do something at the bottom of the tree—She made a thumbs up gesture.

Discovering the sneak attack of the hair, Bivorio clicked her tongue lightly and used a small portion of the darkness to intercept. Kuroe's hair was deflected in the clash with the black spear. She instantly withdrew her hair as though she were afraid of getting caught. However, this did divide Abyss' attention in controlling the darkness. The shield's density should have decreased—Hence, Fear pushed harder with her arms, burying the flower sword deeper by millimeters, centimeters, almost piercing it—

But that was as far as it went.

She sensed Abyss' sneering. Feeling despair, all Fear could see was darkness. It was a rare opportunity with Kuroe offering assistance between all the things she was doing, was it not enough? Fear already had no more strength to spare. Were she to take a breath, her whole body would probably lose all power, right? Just a bit further, clearly all she needed was for the sword to pierce just a bit further!

Fear's body began to falter.

Everything was about to end. The warning signs of collapse.

Next—

"Liar."

Nikaidou Kururi buried the «Returning Kukri of Childbirth» into Abyss' center.

She aimed for the back where there was no darkness acting as a cushioning material.

This was an act of pure—

Condemnation.

"Kururi, you bitch!"

"Family, yeah right... You made me forget about Yutaka! This thing here, if I had still remembered that incident, I never, ever, would have..."

"Oh? You recalled it? Now that's truly extraordinary... such bonds... But it was what you wished for!"

Liar—Fear thought to herself. You merely wanted a pawn who loved cursed tools, that's all—She murmured to herself. This man's insanity and depravity were sufficient for her to make such a conclusion.

What did Kururi actually think?

The answer was given by her trembling hands that pushed the blade of condemnation deeper.

Even so, Abyss was not yet destroyed. A single kukri knife was not enough to break that cross.

"O—oooh!"

The darkness writhed and moved towards the back, sending Kururi's body flying. The knife remained embedded in the cross while the girl's petite body rolled into the depths of the corridor.

Fear did not miss this excellent opportunity. The shield of darkness became even less dense. Abyss was distracted.

(Right here!)

Fear concentrated the last of her strength and shoved her weapon with reckless abandon. Penetrate—Penetrate—Penetrate through!

Clack! The teardrop-shaped tip of the sword made a sound like chipping stone as it stabbed into the cross—However.

That too, was as far as it went.

The darkness remained. The tip of the sword had only barely managed to penetrate its defense.

The sword remained motionless, unable to pierce any further. Body strength, grip strength, arm strength, Fear's power was reaching a limit.

"Ku... Kukuku! Owing to Kururi, I was worried for a moment there... But it looks like this is the end...!"

"Yeah, this is the end."

Fear admitted honestly.

Because this was enough.

"Then you should give up! I asked that boy to make his confession, thereby using the divinity called a curse to bestow salvation upon him. He no longer needs to waste his efforts on the troublesome task of lifting curses from Wathes. Hence, even if you join the Family, he won't care at all!"

"You're still going on about that? «Narrow Narrow Abyss»—You and your curse cannot save people! You're just a mere cross, stop falsely claiming to be God!"

Then she infused her will into the sword of petals whose tip was embedded inside the cross. Fear infused her will of "Okay, let's do it!"

How foolish, she thought. In the cube that harbored all the sadism humans could conceive, how could there possibly exist a tool whose usage ended with a simple stab?

"You will die because of me, who is merely a cross. You will witness clearly this cross of mine that is as merciless as God!"

—Blossom.

The flower sword's blade was split apart into four pieces with the tip opening up in a cross shape. The tear shapes at the tip popped out as hooks for stabbing into and ripping open a human body effortlessly. This sword of a flower blossomed in the shape of a cross, causing torn flesh to roll up and the flower bud known as the human body to blossom.

Blooming forcibly, the sword carved a cross-shaped wound on top of Abyss' cross form. Creaking, grating, the cross gradually ruptured from the gouging.

"Ugh... Gh... Uh..."

"Abyss!"

Bivorio's voice was full of anxiety. Serves you right—Fear thought to herself as she felt all strength suddenly sucked out from her body. She had exhausted all her power in penetrating the darkness.

Losing strength in her knees, she collapsed into a sitting posture on the floor but without letting go of the weapon in her hand. Within her rapidly darkening view, she could see Abyss' darkness, darker than that from any other source, disappearing from around him—

Hence.

The condemnation carved by Kururi from behind—

And the stigmata carved by Fear from the front—

Combined to dissect the cursed cross into an ordinary rectangle.

From beneath her eyelids that were about to close...

At the same time as Fear watched Abyss' darkness disappearing, the dress of darkness covering Bivorio also dissipated. Perhaps due to the disappearance of the armor that allowed her wounded body to move forcibly, Bivorio was now vomiting blood, pressing her hand against her abdomen, collapsing with her eyes out of focus. Shattered into quite a few pieces, the remains of the cross also fell onto the floor of the corridor, its broken fragments scattering.

Ahhh—It's finished. I succeeded, Haruaki—

Amidst exhilarating exhaustion and relief, Fear heard female laughter.

"Ahhh... Ah... Ha... Aha..."

Sobbing as she laughed.

But it was extremely hollow. The hollow laughter of a girl who had lost everything.

"Aha... Haha... Haha... Ahhh... Oooaaaaahahaha... Ooha... Hee... Ooh..."

Blown away, Kururi slowly got up to her feet. Kicking away the cross fragment that had rolled over to her feet, she did not seem to notice and walked unsteadily into the depths of the corridor. Towards where? Did she want to go somewhere? Or like a lost child, looking for a direction—Ambiguous footsteps.

What should Fear say? No idea.

What should Fear tell her? No idea.

But she knew she had to say something.

Thinking that, Fear decided to speak out. However, she could no longer withstand the heavy weight of her eyelids. Drowsiness overwhelmed all her thoughts. The instant she lost consciousness, the last thing she saw was the figure of the girl disappearing into the dark depths of the chilly school building, laughing as she sobbed, as though she were walking into the abyss of hell.

Fear did not know how long her eyes remained shut.

As her limbs gradually regained strength, she sat up. Bivorio remained collapsed on the floor. There were no signs of Kururi in the surroundings. Although there were still many things to be done, Fear decided to check out the situation outside which had gone quiet.

Peering out the window, she discovered that the battle had concluded as suspected. With unsteady steps, she jumped out the window. The rain had greatly diminished already, but her body was still greeted by icy-coldness.

Hearing a patter of footsteps, Fear found Kuroe standing by her side.

"I really have to say this, you helped me greatly there."

"Because I had to pay attention to Kono-san's side too, I was only able to help you a little... Anyway, you're welcome. Of course, it'd be better if you could repay me with your body."

Gazing blankly as usual, Kuroe remained aloof as always.

Konoha was also standing nearby. Fear frowned at the sight of her.

"Hey Cow Tits, it's that whatchamacallit, right? Whatever 'cliche' or 'signature move'? Every time you defeat the enemy, you have to go full naked."

"Eh... Uwah!"

Throwing a glance at Konoha who frantically ran towards her clothes, Fear surveyed the surroundings. To be honest, she did not care one little bit about Cow Tits the eye sore.

What mattered was—The two remaining people.

Aiko was lying sprawled on the ground. For some reason, Haruaki was kneeling before her, his hand extended into Aiko's pocket. Fear understood that there was no danger and the situation was not going to worsen.

Clutching Haruaki's other hand, Aiko rubbed it against her forehead and simply cried.

Fear called out to Haruaki from behind:

"On the way home, what are you going to buy for me without a doubt? It's my favorite food, that tasty thing."

Without turning his head, Haruaki laughed lightly and wryly through his nose:

"...I forgot to ask you: has the ranking between rice crackers and roasted sweet potatoes changed? You looked so touched back when you were eating that sweet potato."

Fear felt something overflow from the depths of her heart.

Something massive and comfortable, an emotion that made her want to laugh, cry and yell loudly all at once.

But Fear suppressed that feeling and squeezed words out of her throat:

"...Hmph, rice crackers remain unshakable as number one. Although roasted sweet potatoes are not bad, how should I put this? ...It feels like I'll get tired of the taste if I eat it every day. But I won't tire of rice crackers even if eaten on a daily basis. This difference is huge."

Understood—Haruaki shrugged in amusement. In his view, the status quo was fine.

As for Aiko, whom Fear could see over on the other side of Haruaki's shoulder, something needed to be done.

Fear felt that there were words she had to tell Aiko.

Although she did not get a chance to tell Kururi, she felt she must tell Aiko right now no matter what.

"The Family... Do they have anything warmer than the hand that is filling up your heart right now?"

Fear's voice flew over Haruaki's shoulder.

There was no response for quite a while, but finally—

Aiko's shoulders shuddered slightly. An answer that was obvious even if she did not voice it.

"If you ever forget what you are, won't you repeat the same mistakes again? After all, you're a pot of curses, a cursed pot, a pot that has been cursed. Once the Family has you in their possession, how could they possibly not make use of you? Even if you forget your past, only new curses await you in that future. Didn't you notice this logical and inevitable outcome? —Or perhaps, you didn't want to notice?"

Phew—Sighing, Fear continued:

"I've also thought about it before, about forgetting the fact of being cursed. Like daily, for no particular reason, wanting to forget, unable to deceive myself—But it is not something that can be forgotten."

"...That's... very painful..."

"Yes, it is. That's why I need to say it. I need to tell you."

Cruel words.

Extremely cruel and icy-cold words.

"—You must suffer."

Aiko's body trembled.

Ahhh... Because—

If one were to forget, then one would not be too unworthy of salvation?

Those victims who died because of the curse.

As well as herself who had been born from their cursing.

One could not pretend it never happened. That was not acceptable.

No matter how many tears were shed, that could not be allowed.

"But—"

Fear looked lightly towards Haruaki's back. Konoha was frantically putting on her clothes. Kuroe stood standing, her blank gaze carrying a vague sense of gentleness.

"I say this to myself as well. So let us suffer together. Even if it's hopeless alone, if we have companions, we can surely endure it. It goes for me and it goes for you as well. We must suffer repeatedly, again and again, but we will still live as ourselves. Doing things for the good of others, lifting our curses, living as our ordinary selves."

"...I... can't do... anything, but... curse others..."

"Haha. Fear couldn't do anything either."

"Muu."

Haruaki laughed. He laughed cheerfully. Then quietly taking Aiko by the hand, he stood up and said:

"Even if you can't do anything, all you need to do is practice and try hard. These small things can start from the ground up. What special powers, those don't really matter. To be honest, I don't even want to make use of them. However~ If using those abilities can help save someone, it can't be helped either."

Indeed, just as Fear had told Abyss, curses could not save people.

In that case, how could her earlier actions be explained? In order to save everyone in school, what did wielding those torture tools constitute?

—Faced with this internal question, Fear immediately got the answer.



My wish is not using a curse to save people.

Instead, it is me, who bears a curse, who wants to save people.

It was a minute distinction, but also a profound distinction.

"Ultimately, the power obtained from being cursed is just a replaceable inheritance. Whether me or you, no matter what abilities result from being cursed, no matter what those abilities can achieve, it doesn't matter. There's only one thing that bugs me about you—When can I challenge you to a dishwashing rematch again? Only that. If there's a trick to dishwashing, please tell me. Otherwise, it'd be too unfair."

Hearing Fear's words, Aiko looked up in surprise. Through her dripping wet bangs, she looked at Haruaki who was supporting her by the hand, looked at Konoha who was finally dressed, looked at Kuroe, and finally looked at Fear—

"...Hweh~"

That was the sound she made.

Perhaps there was something that made her happy.

Or perhaps everyone's gazes were making her embarrassed.

Or perhaps she felt troubled, not knowing how to react.

Or just maybe, it was because of the flying knife that stabbed into her chest.

—Curses could never save people.

—Those who thought they were saved, ultimately could not be saved.

Part 7

Alice Bivorio Basskreigh was half awake in a dreamlike state.

The wounds in her abdomen were hurting. Her body felt feverish and boiling from the center of her tumultuous brain.

Ahhh, I remember now, this feeling. A feeling I haven't experienced for decades. A primal fear originating from actions deviating from social

consensus. A tangible feeling akin to absolute ostracism. Accepting self-enlightenment regarding past misconceptions.

A conscience.

Because «Narrow Narrow Abyss» was gone, his curse had disappeared.

His curse of "relieving owners of their conscience" had disappeared.

Unburdened by their conscience, people succeeded. Evil wishes obtained salvation. Whether the wishes of evil cultists, the wishes of narcotics smugglers, the wishes of terrorists, the wishes of serial killers, the wishes of a priest who sold children, or even the wishes of a woman who murdered people and instigated murders and suicides because she loved cursed tools deeply, all had obtained salvation.

But they could not be saved. The world did not tolerate or permit these people to live for long. Hence, they all perished. This is clearly not right, I clearly shouldn't be doing this—Asking themselves as they perished. Hence, perishing continued today as before.

Bivorio opened her eyes slightly. Or perhaps, her eyes had remained open all this time. That was possible too. Focusing her gaze, what she saw were remains. Her beloved man, her beloved transcender, her beloved cross... Remains.

(Ahhh...!)

Her entire body was struck by bone-chilling terror. She recalled everything she had done to this date. She remembered him whom she had loved, loving him deeply as a transcender, loving him deeply as family. She remembered how she had put that love into action—All sorts of acts she had committed.

(Ahhh... Ahhh! No, no, but no, this isn't, how could I—!)

Her memories and emotions were at odds. She remembered everything she had done in the past and all the emotions and logic behind them at the time. However—there was one single emotion missing among them that she was naturally supposed to have. A sense of guilt.

Only now did she first realize how unnatural it was.

Overflowing. As though demanding all her past debts to be paid immediately, a sense of guilt invaded her all at once.

The flood of decades worth of guilt was overwhelming. Pain stabbed her brain, gripped her heart and choked her uterus. Stinging pain. I'm breaking... I'm breaking... I'm breaking! Ahhhhh! A! I'm clearly nothing more than just an A!

She could not comprehend. Everything, everything, everything, everything!

Why? Why did it turn out like this?

"Sob sob... Sob sob sob... Sob sob sob sob..."

Tears, nasal mucus and fresh blood dripped down. As naked as the day she was born, Bivorio crawled along the corridor. She picked up the largest fragment of Abyss' remains. Guilt. Who knew, she did not know.

Even so, her gaze was still drawn to the knife embedded in the remains.

This. It was this thing's fault.

And whose fault was it?

Pulling out the knife, Bivorio continued to crawl. Almost rubbing her face against the wall, she struggled to get up. However, she collapsed from a sudden loss of strength. The body of her beloved man broke apart even smaller. Kicking the fragments, she stood up again. As her blood smeared over the window sill, she straightened her knees. The situation outside finally entered her view.

A silver-haired girl. Bivorio could not even remember her name. However, this girl was the enemy she had been facing until just now. Things had already ended up this way by the time Bivorio woke up. This was the only fact she could understand.

That girl caused this.

That girl caused this.

That girl caused this—!

Hence, Bivorio raised her arm.

The cursed knife's weight was actually quite light. A knife existing only to kill, it felt joy even from receiving muddled killing intent. Despite being thrown by a weak woman, the knife planned to obediently bring that killing intent to fruition.

In a straight line, a straight line—

Carrying her question of "Why did it turn out like this?", the knife flew—

Bivorio did not see the result. It did not matter. She felt something entangling her body, but that did not matter either.

Embracing Abyss' remains, Bivorio cried like a child as she closed her eyes and pondered.

—I can't comprehend... anything... anymore.

—Please, someone, save me.

—Oh God.

—I won't... curse you ever again.

Part 8

Time seemed to slow down for an instant.

Fear watched as Aiko rushed in front of her. She watched as Aiko took the hit for her, pierced in the chest by the knife flying from the school building—

"Ah..."

Coughing as she spat out chunks of blood, Aiko swayed as though she were dancing. The muddy ground, through the principle known as gravity, caught her body violently.

Stabbing into the heart, invading the very root of her existence, the knife fulfilled someone's desire.

"Wha—!"

"Aiko!"

"Aiko-san!"

They all ran over frantically. Fear reached out but stopped her arms halfway, unable to embrace her. Picking Aiko up in her arms seemed to be so dangerous an endeavor that anything could happen.

"W-Why—W-Why... would this..."

"Very obviously, it's that person's doing!"

The instant Fear turned her head towards the school building, Kuroe extended her hair, aiming for the third floor window. Entangling Bivorio's body, Kuroe instantly tied her up. Bivorio was already weeping in delirious state, making no effort to resist or to escape.

"A final struggle in vain huh? What should we do with her!?"

"Kuroe, never mind that woman, Aiko is more important right now!"

"Hmm... Indeed. I want to concentrate my powers, so I'll leave my hair like this and sever it!"

According Kuroe, her severed hair would maintain their stiffness for a while even after being cut. The extended hair was severed and lost tension. Bivorio's body lost balance and fell over while still tied up, disappearing from the window's view.

"Please, hurry and heal her!"

"I'll try my best..."

Kuroe severed her hair and swiftly wrapped it around Aiko's wound. As indicated by the anxiety on Kuroe's face, despite the life force infused through the hair, color still did not return to Aiko's face. Kuroe's powers were able to increase natural healing. Ahhh, but... What if it were a wound that could not heal naturally no matter how much one struggled...

Aiko opened her eyes slightly. Since she was lying down and her bangs had slid to the side, her eyes were visible in a rare moment.

"...I... have... sinned. So... it's okay."

"What are you talking about!? Didn't I tell you that I'm the same!? Cow Tits and Kuroe also! No, you're referring to joining the Family and betraying us? That doesn't matter anymore. Everyone is safe and sound so it's fine! From now on, you'll lift your curse together with all of us, so! Even if you've sinned, you didn't need to do this for protecting me—"

"No. This is... sin unrelated to curses."

She had committed sins that cannot be forgiven even if the curse can be lifted. Fear recalled what Aiko had said earlier.

"I—By my own volition... Unrelated to the curse... Only because I wanted to kill... I killed a human."

Weak exhalation.

It was... a breath of confession.

"His name is Heinzmann Diemelgerg. My previous owner. Also a knight from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion, the One-Man Force: «Isolate»."

"Wha—"

This unexpected confession caused Fear to hold her breath. In that case, in other words—Aiko belonged to the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion? Those people had not interfered any further ever since that Peavey woman was defeated. That said, Fear knew that it could not have lasted indefinitely and that they would return to cause a commotion eventually—

"I arrived... to this place as... the equipment of the knight who was sent to destroy you. Then for the sake of battle, I was forced to perform necessary restocking of venom. I've always hated it so I was very unwilling that time as well, I hate it, hate it, hate it, hate it absolutely... So... Deciding I was never doing it again, just because of that... I killed... Heinzmann."

"Speaking of which, that name... Just now, that..."

Recalling something, Konoha narrowed her eyes and murmured. Perhaps seeing her reaction, Aiko gazed without focus and said:

"...In order to take care of the body, I made it into venom. The place was... Near where I met everyone for the first time... An abandoned house. After that... Not knowing what to do... I walked and walked... and saw a river. The river was very clear and beautiful, but my hands were filthy. So I... used the river... to wash my hands—That's why... I was there."

Hence they had met. There was cute little dog there, but since her owner was no longer alive, she did not need to kill it. Foolishly, not knowing anything, she embraced the dog—

"...It wasn't due to a curse's impulse, neither was it required by the curse's powers. I simply murdered because I wanted to kill. That's my sin. This is... retribution... for that sin... So... it's alright."

"Of course it's not alright! Come on, how could it possibly be alright!?"

"Even if retribution and atonement are required, it doesn't have to be in this way! This... this!"

Aiko happily gazed back at Fear and Haruaki.

She smiled.

"Uh... May I... make two... requests?"

How could anyone refuse? But conversely, Fear hoped that Aiko could listen to a simple wish in exchange.

No matter who listened to this wish, if only someone could realize it, no matter who.

"...I never considered what I was going to do after killing Heinzmann. All I could think about was stopping things. Going to your home... Was pure chance. But... Really... I never expected—A good place. Although time was short... I know."

"Yes... Yes yes, that home is a good place. Although it's old and decrepit, with only spaciousness as its only good quality—it's a good place nonetheless. S-So!"

How strange. Why was his voice trembling? Why was his vision getting blurry?

"Right, so... I... want to stay... in that home. No matter where, even just a storeroom, I hope you can put me in that home. Provided... it doesn't cause you any trouble..."

"How could it cause any trouble... You're going to lift your curse together with Fear and the others, right? So—As the master of the house, I give permission. Yes, I give permission!"

"...I'm so glad."

Clasping Haruaki, whose voice was trembling just like hers, by the hand, Aiko smiled again.

"As your senior, I also give permission. Compared to a certain noisy, complaining pair of runts, you're several times better than them as a junior."

"Likewise coming from me, senior number two. I'm really looking forward to using my seniority to force my junior to confess who she likes... Really."

Konoha and Kuroe spoke respectively in calm tones.

"S-Senior number three agrees. I mentioned it just now, between us... Victory has not been decided. I still have not shown you... my dignity... as your senior..."

Aiko's bangs quivered from her breath. Her breath carried the same meaning as previously.

"So... What's your other wish? I will realize it using my full authority as master of the house. Tell me, Aiko!"

"...Pocket."

With just a single word, Haruaki understood what she was trying to say. Naturally, everyone present understood.

She did not wish for her pockets to be empty.

Rather than the curse of venom, she wanted something gentler.

Rather than something cold and hard like pebbles, she wanted something warmer.

She wished to fill up herself, making herself more fulfilled—

"Look..."

Haruaki's hand slowly reached into her pocket.

Aiko made a satisfied expression she had never displayed before.

"...Pwah~"

She smiled. Her next whispers were very calm.

"Ahhh... I don't have to curse anyone anymore. I don't... need to be cursed by anyone anymore. Although I still remember the past and these memories bring me pain, I'm not alone. I'm really... relieved—"

Then as though she had suddenly remembered something, she gazed tenderly at Fear:

"But—That's right. I really want to... watch Fear... dance... officially..."

Halfway through her speech, she disappeared.

Her clothes collapsed, having lost what occupied them. Sitting on top of the clothes was—

Shattered where a knife was embedded...

What could only be described as beautiful—

An indigo pot.

Haruaki remembered. Whether her initial arrival at their home or what happened after she entrusted her wish to the Family.

He remembered everything.

However, even though his memories returned...

Why—why didn't everything return to normal?

"Damn it... Kuroe, hey, Kuroe!"

"...Sorry, I can only raise a person's natural healing ability, but there's nothing I can do if the wound is too deep. Neither can I do anything for someone who has reverted to tool form—And it goes without saying, I can't bring the dead back to life either. However..."

"However?"

Konoha answered Haruaki's question as she knelt down and picked up Aiko's fragments.

"...We carry dual traits of humans and tools. In other words, damage incurred in tool form can sometimes heal like a human's wounds. Like a chipped blade returning to its original, newly sharpened state, or a frayed plushie repairing itself on its own. Last time when I cut open Sovereignty's chest lightly, the wound closed up under the same principles."

"Th-Then in that case!"

As Haruaki looked up, Konoha shook her head with a mournful expression.

"Nevertheless—Whether humans or tools, once completely 'dead,' there is no way of recovering. Like a broken blade is not longer a blade and an incinerated plushie is no longer a plushie, once destroyed beyond recognition, there is no hope of recovery."

"...Then... what about her...?"

"I understand what you're thinking, Haruaki-kun, but according to my judgment, to be honest—The chances are slim. This is based on the fact that she could no longer maintain human form, as well as this level of damage as seen here."

"But then again, the chances are not zero, Kono-san."

Hearing Kuroe point out quietly, Konoha nodded.

"Certainly—Even though it might approach zero infinitesimally, it's possible that destruction is not complete. Although who knows how much time it would take, there is a chance that recovery might happen eventually—that cannot be ruled out. That said, it's only the optimistic view."

Hence, that was why Konoha was picking up the fragments. In case this miracle really happened, Aiko would then be able to recover with ease. Despite talking about slim chances, Konoha surely did not wish for that to be so.

Naturally, Haruaki was the same.

Hoping, wishing, praying and believing.

He would wait forever. Just as she had wished, that home would wait forever for her to return.

Just as this moment, beneath the sunny sky where all the dark clouds had disappeared, an announcement was heard from the sports ground:

'Due to the sun coming out, the afternoon events will start in ten minutes. Participating students, please prepare as quickly as possible—'

Time, which seemed as though it had stopped, began to move as a lively bustling came from the other side of the school building. Haruaki listened as Fear whispered softly:

"...What a dummy, that girl, that was not two but three wishes..."

Fear stood up and turned around, rubbing her arm against her face several times. It was completely obvious what she was doing.

"She said she wanted to see me dance officially, right?"

"...That's right, she did say that."

Haruaki answered Fear who did not turn her head back.

"Well then... I must let her watch. Yes, indeed—We promised. So, Haruaki, you must stand somewhere with a clear view! Together with her!"

Then Fear started walking.

Towards that direction, her fists clenched tightly.

Even so, Haruaki could still see her petite shoulders trembling, as though the aftermath of certain emotions lingered.

—Dance! Fear commanded herself.

Despite the suffering, despite the pain, who knew if she could dance successfully.

What mattered was neither looking back, nor halting in her steps, nor the tears falling from her eyes.

Instead, it was the dance.

Even though little of her stamina remained, she gritted her teeth and danced.

This was their promise.

The promise they had made on the veranda—To celebrate her arrival.

Part 9

Bivorio found her eyelids heavy. Her field of view narrowed. Everything had become akin to rotten mud. Guilt, memories, the fact that Abyss was no longer, love. All this was excessively jumbled together, a world where she had nothing to rely on. Amidst this, there existed certain solid sensations, only the corridor she could feel as she lay on the floor as well as the cross' remains that she embraced in her bosom. However, even the issue of whether embracing this thing could be considered good or bad, she could not understand. She did not understand. How she wished to silence her thoughts.

Her body was tied up and immobile. Hence, she could no go anywhere or escape. Neither could she escape from the world of her inner mind. This was prison.

"Sob... Sob sob... Sob sob sob..."

Outside the school building, the roaring of the announcer could be heard in the distance. How annoying. Her mind became several times more agitated. How she wished to silence everything but all she could do was weep.

Just at this moment—she sensed the presence of someone standing before her.

"I was really worried for a moment there, but luckily, things concluded with relatively few losses. After all, that girl was not going to live long anyway... Were you aware of it? The organ of mercy: Euthanasia."

Who was this? Unable to widen her eyes, she could not see clearly. All she could hear was a voice.

"It's a function included with the device that connects the Indulgence Disk. A sort of insurance policy the Knights' Dominion imposes on self-aware Wathes. To prevent Wathes from killing their own kind, resisting, running away—if they don't return to the Knights' Dominion headquarters for treatment or uninstall it on their own, the device will automatically fulfill its function... Destroying the Wathe that is connected to it."

"..."

"Even equipped with such a device, why would she kill her owner? We'll never know now. Was it because she wished to act freely under her own will, no matter how little time she had left? Or was she unaware of the Euthanasia device? —The possibility of the latter might be substantial, yes? In any case, it is truly stimulating in various ways to observe the philosophy of living in the moment, taboo curses and the reasons for redefining one's own existence. Oh dear, how interesting, what excellent food for thought."

What on earth was this man talking about? No idea. Bivorio could only get the sense that "he sounds just like a researcher." The talkative man suddenly fell silent, seemingly shrugging—That was the feeling she got.

"Anyway, that's a bit of a tangent. Being too talkative is my bad habit—Very well, Alice Bivorio Basskreigh. I never thought you'd suddenly go that far. Once you decided on war, you went as far as to send virtually all of your members on suicide bombing missions. The effectiveness of preemptive first strikes cannot be denied, history is proof of that—But it

was truly troublesome. Although not to the level of crippling, almost all of our branches suffered serious damage."

"...?"

Understanding, language, thought. Given the current chaotic state of her mind, she could process none of that. Nevertheless, she was struck by an instinctive sense of fear. Bivorio wanted to flee, but bound by something, her body could not move. Even standing was impossible. As her field of view gradually dimmed, all she could hear was the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Why would you instigate such violence? Aggregating all the information and deductions at my disposal, the answer is simple... Very clearly, you were mistaken. You people really should verify your facts more accurately. Verifying the reliability of facts is the first step in data analysis. However, if facts were provided with the intent to deceive, it is true that the difficulty of verification increases correspondingly."

His next words sounded a little aghast.

"Seriously, it's all the doing of my unworthy little sister. It's fine for her to believe that this could act as a deterrent, but she did not understand how the situation could have developed from there. Clearly, the world does not revolve around her... That girl is not as clever as she thinks she is. A little more self-awareness would do her good."

Unworthy little sister. Ahhh, Bivorio felt like she thought of something. A name. A name somehow related to herself, very related.

Unable to get up, her consciousness hazy, Bivorio could only see an expanse of darkness as she looked up at the source of the voice. The man's approaching figure entered her view. Then the figure proceeded to extend a shadow resembling an arm towards her—

"To be frank, all I intended to do today was check out my sister's situation and visit my subordinate at the hospital. My original plan was quite modest, but luckily, you happened to appear before me like this right now. Given that you are the head of the organization that did so much to us, I can't really turn a blind eye to this—"

Name. Name. The enemy's... name.

The circuitry in Bivorio's chaotic mind suddenly connected and words slipped out of her mouth.

"You are... Y-Yamimagari—"

In the middle of her sentence, her view went completely dark and Bivorio's thoughts were interrupted there.

—Right outside the school, in a desolate back alley.

Sitting collapsed on the wet ground, she opened her eyes. Swiveling her neck slowly, she looked towards the other end of the alley... Whose face was that? A chance passerby? The person vanished from view in an instant.



Even if that was a certain person's face, even if anything had happened, she had no memory of it.

What she recognized were only the tears on that face whose eyes were closed...

Not a smile but traces of tears.

The same. It was the same as her own face, reflected in the puddle on the ground.

Hence—Surely—

That person was surely the same as her. This was the only fact she was certain.

A mother, but not a mother. Different from her, but the same.

For some reason, she was suddenly overcome with the urge to laugh.

"Aha!"

Kururi laughed emptily. While laughing, something fell at the same time, creating ripples in the puddle below her face. These were the last droplets of rain to fall here.

Epilogue

Part 1

The next day after the sports festival, Tuesday, was a day off in lieu of the holiday on Monday.

Fear was taking a midday nap after lunch when she suddenly woke up in the living room, only to discover Kuroe sitting formally on the veranda in seiza, making a rustling noise while doing who knows what. Giving "Haru's meals are very tasty~" as her only reason, she had specifically closed the shop for a lunch break and came running home. Although this sort of thing happened often and there was nothing to be surprised about—

"Huwah~ Hey Kuroe, isn't it about time for you to return to the shop?"

Glancing at the clock and making a great yawn, Fear crawled to the veranda.

"...Three... Four... Five... Ufufu, what an unexpected windfall. What should I buy? I still have a backlog on the home console, so I guess I'll use this cash to enhance the lineup for my handheld gaming device..."

An eerie grin had subtly appeared on Kuroe's expressionless face as she counted the pieces of paper in her hand. Fear had some recollection of these. Peering over Kuroe's shoulder at what she was holding, Fear asked:

"Hmm~ Is that... money?"

"Ah."

Kuroe swiftly hid the cash behind her back. Suspicious. Too suspicious.

"...What money is that? That's quite a lot there."

"What is it, I wonder?"

Kuroe's gaze escaped. This was getting even more suspicious.

"Muu... I saw it on television once, this isn't that thing, right? What do they call it, black money? That's unacceptable, Kuroe, this is no good! As comrades in the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance, of course I won't raise the alarm. But I'm not perfect, you know, so it's very possible my tongue might slip or I might become an informant. Just to be on the safe side, I believe it's best that you cough up some of that money for my convenience!"

"No, it's nothing at all, Ficchi~"

By this point, Kuroe was still acting stubborn.

Hmmuu, really... Fear feigned understanding and returned Kuroe's strangely cordial smile with a radiant smile—Then suddenly, she pounded.

"Since it's nothing, lemme have a look! Gimme gimme!"

"Hiya. B-Be more gentle...!"

"I'll be gentle if you'll come clean, so hurry and gimme... Hmm, where did you hide it? Where? Here? Or... There?"

"W-Wah, that's only my underwear inside, okay~"

Although Kuroe was trying to muddle through by saying unbelievable things as usual, it was useless. Fear had her firmly pinned down beneath her weight. Fear was searching under Kuroe's clothes, finally causing Kuroe to sigh—

"Okay fine, in that case..."

"Muu, have you given up resisting?"

"...I have no choice but to show my hidden hand. Heya~"

Kuroe's hair moved, took out something from her pocket and threw it into the garden.

That object was small and round.

Shaped like a disc with an irregular surface.

Carrying the taste of soy sauce—

"Heyaaaaaaaaah!"

Fear made a sliding tackle towards the garden and caught the rice cracker with both hands.

That's truly terrible! What a waste if it actually fell on the ground. Don't complain even if you suffer retribution from the rice cracker god. But anyway, it's no big deal now that the rescue operation was a success. Let me dig in now!

Crunch crunch munch munch munch.

Mmmmm, so tasty. The extra hint of spiciness was truly—

"...Oh no!"

Back to her senses, Fear looked back to find Kuroe had vanished from the veranda.

I fell for it! This schemer, how dare she resort to such horrifying means!? To be able to escape through such underhanded methods, surely you won't be able to find more than ten people in the whole wide world...!

By this point, it was probably futile to run after her? Just as Fear was getting up, she sat back down in the garden.

"Muu... What money was that? Hiding it so desperately and running away, there must be some unspeakable story behind it."

Fear cocked her head as she continued to chew the rice cracker in her mouth.

Kuroe's money remained a mystery but never mind, she thought.

After all, the blackmail payment she wanted to demand was already in her mouth.

Part 2

At this moment, Haruaki was currently in Konoha's room. He had been summoned by her request of "I've got something to say." After sitting formally in seiza opposite each other and staring for a few seconds, Konoha seemed to finally resolve herself, coughing once and clearing her throat.

"Haruaki-kun... Haruaki-kun, you erred yesterday, didn't you?"

"W-What are you referring to?"

"We asked Kuroe-san to protect you, Haruaki-kun, because we had no idea what risks there were... But not only did you ignore our concerns, leaving yourself alone and unguarded, but in the end, you even ran over to the combat zone by yourself."

"Umm... Well~ Because I was very worried... B-But why does it matter? After all, I remained safe and sound. Besides, you two were saved through Kuroe's assistance, right?"

Konoha glared sharply.

"That's neither here nor there. Whether safe and sound or saving us, those are just results in hindsight. Should I call this a lack of danger awareness? This is an attitude problem! That's why I believe you should receive punishment, Haruaki-kun!"

"P-Punishment?"

"Yes—I've heard that when you asked Kuroe to come over to us, Haruaki-kun, you said something like 'I'll do anything you want,' didn't you? Because Kuroe-san seems to be a bit busy, I shall exercise this right in her stead, also partially to include your punishment, Haruaki-kun. I have indeed paid—Cough! No, umm, discussed with Kuroe-san and obtained her consent."

Hence, Konoha took out a piece of paper from her shirt pocket. On it was what appeared to be Kuroe's handwriting—«Certificate of the Right to Have Haru Undertake Any Kind of Request». When the heck did something like that exist?

"I-I don't recall ever issuing this kind of certificate?"

"This is only for the purpose of clearly displaying the right so that you cannot just laugh it off and muddle through."

Konoha's tone of voice was extremely serious.

Terrible, there was this ominous feeling of not knowing what she would ask. Konoha was serious. If this continued, who knew how she would use this certificate, which could hold control over life and death, to make what kind of demand—

"Ooh! My head hurts! T-To be honest, I don't quite remember what happened during the sports festival actually... Perhaps I can't really be certain if I made that kind of promise or not...!"

Holding his temples, Haruaki deliberately shook his body unsteadily, but all he received for his efforts was Konoha's cold stares. No way out after all, huh? Looks like it's hopeless.

Sigh~ Konoha sighed and slumped her shoulders dejectedly.

"Are you that unwilling...? Although it's punishment, it's not like I'll ask you to do anything excessive, okay..."

She lowered her gaze and started writing awkwardly on the tatami with her finger. Watching her like that, Haruaki felt a strange sense of guilt for some reason.

Indeed, perhaps there was no need to lie clumsily so as to run away. Besides, he did promise something similar to Kuroe. Although he could not accept the matter of transferring the right, oh well, considering this was Konoha, she should not be making any excessively strange demand, right? Indeed, looking at it from a different angle, perhaps it was a much better situation compared to Kuroe whose demand would be a complete unknown.

"How troubling... I get it, okay. I accept it. I, Yachi Haruaki, recognize your right to use that certificate."

As he raised his arms in surrender, Konoha suddenly looked up, her eyes glimmering brightly.

"R-Really?"

"Since you possess that kind of certificate, I have no choice, right? So, what should I do next?"

Hearing him ask, Konoha stood up elatedly as though she were about to burst into song. Walking about in her room she seemed to be preparing for something.

"Ufufu, this is still a secret for now... I'd be troubled if you ran away because you were shy. Ah, is my hair and my body fine? Should I go take a bath first..."

...Did I imagine what I heard? It sounded as though Konoha was nonchalantly murmuring outrageous words to herself.

Part 3

"How should I say it, this is embarrassing..."

"Ehehe... This makes me happy, but I'm a little embarrassed too. I never imagined you would do this kind of thing for me, Haruaki-kun."

"Then don't ask me to do it! Damn it, I'm going to go slightly faster now!"

"A-Ah! That hurts. Please... Be more gentle... Because it's quite sensitive there..."

"S-Sorry, I haven't gotten used to it yet. Then I'll go slightly slower."

"Yes... No need to rush, it's okay..."

Gulp—Listening in on this conversation, a certain person swallowed hard. The tightly clenched fist was sweating.

"Oh! Oh... A-Almost there... Ah, phew~"

"Eh? It's finished? I guess it really can't be helped... Then let's switch, you lie down and I'll service you this time!"

Eh eh? —This was Haruaki's voice. Somehow, it felt like there was a brief dispute.

"You can't win against my in a contest of strength. Come, let me have a look... Good heavens, it's gotten to this stage already. Ufufu, you've accumulated quite a lot, right...?"

"D-Don't say that, okay."

"Aha, sorry. Well then, here I... go..."

"O-Ohhh... Th-That feels so nice."

"I know right? Just relax and leave everything to me. I will... be very gentle..."

What the heck was this 'I'll be very gentle'!?

What needed to be done was decided.

Fear transformed the Rubik's cube and pushed open the sliding door hard.

"Ahhh! I was just practicing with my axe, but stumbled accidentally...! What an embarrassment!"

Saying that, Fear raised the massive hatchet up high and rushed into the room. Over there, she saw two people intimately stuck together as expected—Indeed, intimately stuck together—

Konoha was sitting straight with an ear pick in her hand while Haruaki was lying down with his head on her lap.

"...Eh?"

"What do you mean, eh? W-What are you doing!?"

"Uwah~! P-Poke, p-poking... The ear pick is clearly poking somewhere it shouldn't~!"

Despite seeing Haruaki in pain, Fear still continued to swing the axe down. Naturally, she held back in mercy already, hence Konoha effortlessly caught the blade with her bare hands.

"M-Muu..."

"What are you going 'muu' for? A rare moment of healing, why do you have to come and disturb us?"

"I-I wasn't disturbing! I was just... Umm... Practicing my axe but overdid it! This is an accident, an accident!"

"If you can aim that accurately at your target, what kind of accident is this!? Why don't you just apologize honestly? This is truly displeasing!"

"What are you talking about!? Say, you're the one that's displeasing! It's all because the two of you were hiding in a room, sneakily doing who knows what, that's why I mistook it for something shameless... N-No wait, shamelessness is shamelessness no matter what! What is with that posture!"

"Letting someone rest their head on your thigh during an ear cleaning session is the traditional and proper posture! Do you have any objections!?"

"Gunununu...!"

"Grrrrrrr...!"

As usual, Cow Tits was opposing me while maintaining her posture of catching the blade with her bare hands. This Cow Tits was truly maddening. She must be thinking the same thing? I definitely can't lose to her..

Hence, Fear pushed harder. Beneath the blade, she saw Haruaki sneaking out to escape but she ignored it. Making Cow Tits acknowledge her defeat was the most important thing right now—

As for giving the shameless brat a taste of divine retribution, that could be done any time at all.

"Phew... Somehow it feels as though their positions have been reversed from before..."

Escaping Konoha's room, Haruaki sighed. Seriously, after all the time they have spent together, those two girls still could not get along properly... Or should that be attributed to their being close? Thinking over such matters, Haruaki decided to seek sanctuary in a quiet place first.

Taking a cleaning cloth and a feather duster with him, Haruaki entered the secondary residence in the garden. His destination was neither Kuroe's bedroom on the second floor nor Konoha's former room, but the storeroom that took up the entire ground floor. After all, there were things to be done so he might as well clean the storeroom along the way. Taking out his key, he rolled up the metal shutter and entered the secondary residence's ground floor which only had a floor of bare concrete. The icy cold air blew against his skin.

Inside were all sorts of objects waiting for their curses to be lifted. Dolls lined up on shelves, masks hanging on hooks in the wall, pieces of armor lying randomly on the floor... These were all collected by Haruaki's father or sent here without consent by people who had heard of the rumors. Almost all of them lacked special powers and most of them were only lightly cursed. Among them, there were even articles that were kept here simply because they were not needed in the Yachi residence.

Deciding to save the most important task for the last, Haruaki started to clean the storeroom's items using the feather duster. Particles of scattered dust glittered under the sunlight streaming in through the entrance. From time to time, Haruaki found the trapdoor to the basement obstructing his footsteps, but slowly, he circled and inspected the entire storeroom. Anyway, let's leave it at that.

"Okay..."

Taking the cloth to replace the feather duster, he went over to the lowest level of a sturdy rack that seemed like it would remain fine in an earthquake and cautiously took out a certain item kept there.

An indigo-colored pot.

It was broken. Although the largest fragments had been carefully glued back, there were still a number of holes that he could not do anything about. Those parts were wrapped in cloth—"Just keep it wrapped for now.

I have no idea if it will help, but at least it's better than nothing." Hence, the pot was wrapped in bandages containing Kuroe's hair.

The sensation of ceramic felt cold to the touch.

Impossible to compare with body temperature, an object's intrinsic temperature.

Haruaki squinted his eyes and sat down on the storeroom floor, holding the cloth he had brought and carefully wiping the pot. Touching an unnatural depression in the bottom of the interior, the sensation reminded him of the device that was buried in this spot.

They had discovered the device back when they were pulling the knife out of the pot. The knife's tip was embedded into the device, an object that resembled a remote control at first glance. Recalling after the fact, this device felt even more complicated than the one that was installed on Peavey's Dance Time. Like that other device, this one also contained an Indulgence Disk—Although Haruaki was hesitant at first, but seeing as the device itself was already destroyed completely, he finally inserted the Indulgence Disk into Fear, resulting in the «Judas Cradle»'s sealing. Furthermore, if Aiko reawakened, her owner would be Haruaki and reducing the curse's effects was no longer a concern.

...If Aiko reawakened.

Biting his lower lip, Haruaki wiped harder.

In the end, they did not manage to catch Bivorio who had thrown the knife. Even though she was clearly injured and was tied up by Kuroe's hair, she still managed to disappear from the school building somehow. After that, they had immediately called Zenon and asked her to search around, but in vain. The only possibilities they could think of were the following: Kuroe's hair, which was used to bind her, had lost their stiffness earlier than expected (Kuroe herself could not deny this possibility), or maybe Kururi, who was similarly missing, could have done something, or something completely unimaginable had happened.

In the end, the only certainty was that the Family's symbol, Abyss, was completely destroyed. The Family's power and influence was undoubtedly diminished, but ignoring that for now, there were still many things to be concerned about.

"Who knows what will happen—Whatever, it's not like we can do anything proactive on our side, so it's useless to worry."

As if convincing himself, Haruaki muttered. At this moment, he realized he was using too much force to wipe the pot. Smiling wryly, he applied less strength and gently, gently, he caressed her skin once more.

"But by the way... That dance was quite astounding, right? In all sorts of ways."

Haruaki was speaking to the pot that could not answer. But anyway, she was listening, so this was fine. This was not talking to oneself.

It was truly astounding. Because Fear and Konoha's clothes were splattered with mud, they had rinsed themselves using tap water as an emergency measure. The mud was no longer conspicuous, but instead—The wet clothing, drenched by the rain, became even more wet, in other words—

In all sorts of ways, they were toeing the line.

In that precarious state, the instant Fear and Konoha made their appearance on stage, all the male students cheered almost as though they were screaming.

"Seriously, Fear seems to have created a new legend. Or rather, it's Konoha's legend? Class Rep was also groaning with a solemn expression, saying the dance might be cancelled next year—Even if they don't cancel it, the costumes will probably be regulated."

Although it was impossible to tell if it was owing to the legend the girls started, the end result was that the white team's dance had obtained a decisive high score, thereby bringing overall victory to the white team. One could say that the white team's victory was thanks to those two.

Blowing air towards the pot, Haruaki reminisced. He recalled the dance as well as Fear and Konoha's expressions. Still holding the broken pot, he had hid in a dark corner of the school building. In other words, he was watching the dance from a slightly further location—But thinking to himself, he concluded that he probably could not forget those two girls' expressions for the rest of his life.

"...!"

"...!? ...!"

At this moment, more noise from the two girls' dispute could be heard. Haruaki shrugged and his hand that was wiping the pot also shook.

"Seriously... This home is really getting noisy, huh? How troubling."

Indeed, it was really troubling. However—

He did not dislike it.

It was not a bad thing.

"However... It's fine for this home to be like this. Ahhh jeez, it's really wonderful to be able to remember everything. So that's why I'm able to say this. This noise and bustle is this home's normal state. That's the way things have become."

Raising the pot lightly, he caressed the pot's mouth with his fingertips.

As if whispering in her ear, he spoke to the interior of the pot:

"—It's fine for this home to be like this. When Kuroe is around, it gets even noisier. But if there were one more person, it'd be even better. So, we welcome your return at any time."

These words were sucked into the pot.

No response.

Neither "Hweh~" nor "Pwah~"—There was no response.

"...!"

Just as Haruaki was about to cry, a patter of footsteps approached the storeroom. Hastily, he wiped his face with the cloth and turned his head.

"Haruaki, Haruaki~!"

"Hmm~ What's the matter? Have you two stopped arguing?"

"W-We weren't arguing. I guess you can call it a simulated battle or a clash in ideologies... Something like that—Ah..."

Running over, Fear stopped. Slowly, she entered the storeroom and knelt down beside Haruaki.

"You're wiping her clean?"

"Yeah."

A brief moment of silence.

Fear watched his hand with a gentle gaze as Haruaki wiped the pot's curves, finally murmuring:

"Those places on Aiko's body that bulge out, I guess it's obvious where on the human body they correspond to, right? To think you'd stroke those parts so obsessively... You shameless brat."

"D-Don't go saying such weird things!"

Giggle—Fear chuckled. Slowly, she stood up and said to the pot:

"Aiko, if you don't like being touched, you gotta speak up to protest! Otherwise, this shameless brat will keep touching your bulging parts. So—So hurry and wake up!"

But of course, there was no answer.

Fear's gaze wavered in loneliness.

"..."

Haruaki finished wiping and gently returned the pot to the rack. Giving a final pat on the pot's mouth with his palm, he stood up. Then he also did the same to Fear. Pat pat.

"Muu... Don't treat me like a child. I'll curse you!"

"Yes~ yes, then do you have any business? You came to get me for something, right?"

"Oh yeah. Shamelessness aside, how should I put this... Ear cleaning feels quite comfortable, right? It's not fair that only Cow Tits gets to enjoy a moment of healing. I'm tired too, so you should help me do the same thing."

"What do you mean, I should... What's with that twisted logic of yours?"

"Shut up, I'll help clean your ears in return, okay."

"Let me express 'thanks, but no thanks' with my whole mind and soul. I have yet to mentally prepare myself for the possibility of getting my brain

gouged out. Besides, I only helped her do it because of that 'comply with any request no matter what' certificate—"

"You mean this?"

"Wait... How come you have one too? So you girls only conspire together on things like this?"

"Of course not, I snatched this."

"Ooh... Damn it, I knew I should have torn it up at the first opportunity...!"

While conversing, Haruaki and Fear exited the door. As they pulled down the metal shutter, the pair naturally cast a glance into the storeroom and said in unison—

"Well then... See you later, Aiko."

Not a farewell.

But a quiet promise to meet again.

—After the metal shutter descended, peace and quiet returned to the storeroom.

A space without any person.

A domain containing tools that could not speak.

A dead world filled with silence and chilly air.

Even so—

Weakly, weakly...

Only once, there came a sound—

—Clonk.

—The sound of something that had shook.

Then a long silence began in the storeroom again.

Afterword

D-Do you hear that? It's the 4th volume, honey!? —Due to my excitement at seeing this number for the first time, I decided to use this oba-chan style greeting. Hello, I am Minase.

This time, in the style of "bloomers and shorts, let's have a 300-page discussion on which makes the legs look sexier," let me present to you (just kidding) the sports festival episode. At the same time, it also feels like it's "The Bivorio Family Episode Part 2 of 2." That said, it's not like the members of the Family aren't going to appear hence forth. It's a bit like making people think it's finished, but ending up with a "I'm back" or "See you again~" sequel kind of feeling. Or maybe it's a little different?

In this volume, the new characters are all related to the description, "more than meets the eye." This was what I just decided. Looking quite youthful but actually quiet senior—There's senior boobs who has more than meets the eye. Her eyes concealed, what is this girl hiding? —Hidden eye boobs. Also, there is that person who only made a brief appearance (fully nude) in Volume 3—That's the kind of lineup we have. However, there's one person who's not hiding anything, but don't worry about that.

An abrupt change of topic. Not long after writing this book, I came down with a high fever and diarrhea for some unknown reason. Advised to get hospitalized (I ended up not staying), I experienced an intravenous drip and a series of first experiences... Okay, the real topic begins here! Also, because it's a bit disgusting, please be careful if you're in the middle of a meal!

After two days of running to the hospital for intravenous drips, it happened as my health began to subtly get better. Although it improved, I was still rushing into the washroom, clutching my unwell belly, then—

Oh! It's GREEN! (using a foreign accent for some reason)

...Yes, something green descended. Oh dear, it gave me quite a fright. I was only getting nourishment from Pocari, CalorieMate and IV drips, to think that something like that would pop out... I've really witnessed one of the mysteries of the human body.

Although something like that happened, I'm now writing the afterword with great vigor. Being healthy is such a blessing. In order to avoid giving birth

to green children, please take very good care of your health, everyone
(forcing a good ending here)!

This time, let me thank editor Kawamoto-sama and everyone else for taking care of me. Sasorigatame-sama, I almost died from moe at seeing the draft again this time... Particularly Aiko! Really, thank you very much! Also, I must thank all the wonderful readers, of course. This series can continue thanks to all your support. I will continue to try my best and write in this moe, ecchi and mild guro style.

Please treat me well!

Also, in the same month as this volume goes on sale, the Dengeki Bunko Magazine also includes a C³ short story. Interested readers should check it out. Because of focused serialization in the short term, these short stories should run for several consecutive issues. So if possible, please check out the next issue after this as well~

Well then, next time will be the fifth volume. I hope to present it to you all as soon as possible.

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Yang Guifei(楊貴妃): the consort of a famous emperor in the Tang dynasty, Yang Guifei is renowned as one of the Four Great Beauties of ancient China.
2. ↑ Ono no Komachi(小野小町): a Japanese poet, renowned for her unusual beauty. Her name (Komachi) is taken as a synonym for feminine beauty in modern Japan.
3. ↑ Indigo Venom(藍蠱): gu(蠱) is a venom-based poison associated with minority cultures from southern China. Traditionally, gu poison is prepared by sealing several venomous creatures (centipedes, snakes, scorpions, etc) into a vessel where they devour one another, supposedly concentrating the toxins into the sole survivor. "Indigo" relates to Aiko's name where the first character Ai(藍) means "indigo."
4. ↑ Padren(伴天連): a Japanese term used for referring to Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century. Also used to refer to Christianity. The kanji rendering is a corruption of the Portuguese "padren" which means priest.

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Credits

Story : Minase Hatzuki
Illustrator : Sasorigatame
Translator : zzhk

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